



Section A

Biblical/Theological Perspectives

1

Mission in the Old Testament

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A Call to Mission in the Old Testament?

While the New Testament makes a solid case for the involvement of every Christian in mission, it is not quite as straightforward when it comes to the Old Testament. As the renowned biblical scholar Walter C. Kaiser points out, to a great extent, the very notion of a mission mandate for Israel has essentially been abandoned by Old Testament scholarship.¹ This conclusion is motivated in great part by the (alleged) near-absence of Old Testament passages promoting an “evangelistic” impulse and the observation that neither ancient Israel nor the Jewish people have shown much interest in proselytizing Gentiles.

Among scholars who concede the presence of a mission mandate for Israel, the debate tends to orbit around whether her mandate was “centrifugal” or “centripetal.” Was Israel called to bring men and women into the nation or was her role limited to being a community of witness, a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6) intended to attract the Gentiles to the living God?



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I believe there is justifiable ground to challenge both the assertion that Israel was not given a mission mandate or that its mission consisted simply in being a witness. At the very core of the rationale for creating Israel, there is an unmistakable missional² impulse, which is first hinted at in the promise to Abraham. In a declaration in which Yahweh promises Abraham he would become a great nation, an organic link between Abraham's descendants and the nations' future is created: "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). In Exodus 19:5-6, we find an extraordinary statement of purpose for Israel: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Note the win-win character of this promise. If Israel will be faithful to God, God will bless her as his "treasured possession" and use her as a priestly intermediary between the nations and himself. Isaiah 42:6-7 clarifies Israel's priestly role and gives it an explicitly missional spin:

I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

In addition to highlighting the centrifugal *and* centripetal character of God's mandate to Israel (it is probably best not to create a sharp dichotomy between these two concepts), this passage underlines the win-win character of God's promises: 1) God acquires a people; 2) Israel is no longer orphan; 3) the nations are introduced to the living God.

In a similar vein, the story of the prophet Jonah not only points to the centrifugal implications of Israel's mandate to reach the nations, but magnificently confronts ancient Israel's static and self-centered view of its status and role as God's chosen people.

Failure or Success? Two Levels of Discourse

Assuming the Old Testament does indeed point to Israel's mandate to reach out to the nations, the most seminal expression of this principle being found in the promise to Abraham, we need to assess more precisely what might have been entailed in the blessing as such.

From a historical perspective, the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to "all peoples on earth" likely included an allusion to Israel's witness to the nations with respect to the character of Yahweh, including both the centrifugal and centripetal dimensions of such a mandate. While Abraham and his descendants did, on

occasion, turn out to be the conduits of God's blessing,³ Israel's performance with respect to broadcasting the knowledge of God to other nations was dismal. Ancient Israel appears to have been much more theologically and culturally influenced by her neighbors than vice-versa.

The promise to Abraham can also be read in a Christological perspective. Beyond the strictly "evangelistic" mandate that Israel failed to fulfill, God nevertheless intended for the nation to be the conduit of God's revelation in Word and flesh. Israel mediated God's self-revelation in the form of the law and the prophets and, in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), she became the locus of the very presence of God in the person of Christ. It is indeed in Jesus Christ that the full significance of this blessing for all the nations must be apprehended (Rom. 16:25-26).⁴

While in all likelihood the promise to Abraham implied an invitation for Israel to spread the "good news" of Yahweh, the reality is that we can derive but little information about the missional enterprise from an analysis of how Israel implemented its historical mandate to reach out to the nations. In order to gain some insight into this question, we must shift our focus to God himself both with respect to the strategies he used to reach his own people and to the role of the nations in God's redemptive project.

The Creation of a New People

God's missional impulse towards humanity is anchored in his primordial desire to create a people who would love and serve him. Once it becomes clear, however, that humanity's first representatives would reject God's invitation to exercise their free will within a framework of loyalty to God, thereby initiating the deployment of the death impulse in the world (see Gen. 2:15-17; 3:1-24); the Great Missionary immediately launches his plan of redemption.⁵ From the moment humanity is ushered into chaos, God will ceaselessly reach out to men and women.

Humanity's salvation would eventually necessitate the creation of a distinct people from the seed of Abraham and culminate in the birth of the Son of God as a Jew, and his eventual death and resurrection under the reign of Pontius Pilate (Mark 8:31). The creation of a distinct people was intended to secure a "landing pad" for the divine invasion.⁶ The survival of Israel as a religious entity was, therefore, not for her only, but for the benefit of all.

The Old Testament is the record of how God implements his plan of redemption through the creation and the preservation of a distinct people⁷ mandated to be his witness and designated to be the conduit for the coming of the Messiah. Three traditions provide valuable insights into God's missional strategy: the Torah, the prophets, and the wisdom corpus.

The Torah

In Genesis 2:15-17, God invites Adam and Eve to enter into a partnership with him. The injunction to refrain from eating “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” denotes the most fundamental dimension of the relationship that would exist between humans and God, i.e., freedom. God’s friendship is graciously offered and must be freely received.

If by their disobedience, the first two trigger a cataclysmic chain reaction that will in time spread to the very core of reality (Rom. 8:20-22), judgment is not the last word. Adam and Eve cannot avoid the sentence that their choice entailed (Gen. 2:17; 3:8-22), and human existence will be arduous, painful, and violent, but life will go on. God is infinitely committed to the human project and chooses to partner with men and women in spite of the structural flaws that have been introduced by their disobedience. History goes on, because God’s love demands that the species be redeemed.⁸

The next major phase in God’s plan of salvation involves working through Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3). God’s commitment to this new chapter of history is unconditional. While God’s people vehemently resist him in every way possible, God continually devises new strategies to bring them back to himself.

For instance, the Exodus experience highlights well God’s love and compassion (Ex. 2:25). While it is now fashionable to refer to God as the one who manifests himself in weakness, Christ’s *kenosis* (self-emptying) being the most spectacular manifestation of God’s willingness to come down to our level in order to create space for the relationship (Phil. 2:7), God will sometimes reveal himself in all of his magnificent grandeur. When Yahweh intervenes to liberate his people, the Hebrews show little enthusiasm for following this new God. But their reluctance is somewhat understandable. The Hebrew slaves face an existential choice that can only be resolved by assessing who the stronger party is. They need to establish whether their future lies in Yahweh or Pharaoh.

Yahweh understands the terror that fills these men and women. By ordering Pharaoh to let his people go (Exod. 5:1), God sets the stage to demonstrate his absolute superiority over Pharaoh and the Egyptian pantheon.⁹ The outcome of this duel will provide the theological foundation necessary for the Hebrews to follow Moses out of Egypt.

God’s willingness to reveal himself represents another example of the kind of strategy God uses to win his people. Whereas the gods of the ancient Near East maintained a tight lid on what they expected from their worshippers, Yahweh generously revealed himself. This self-disclosure is evident in Genesis 1:28, where God proffers his first command to humanity, and 2:15-17, where Yahweh spells out

what Adam and Eve must do in order to experience life. God never ceases to disclose his will. When Moses loses faith after a first catastrophic encounter with Pharaoh, and asks God whether he knows what he is doing, God offers Moses a glimpse of a bigger picture (Exod. 5:22-6:8). Later, when the Hebrews take possession of the land, Yahweh enters into a binding agreement that delineates what they need to know in order to live faithfully as a free people. The Ten Commandments and the various law codes modulate what is expected of them. The curses and blessings (Lev. 26 and Deut. 27-28) outline the consequences of obedience and disobedience. Nothing is hidden. God reveals his will to his people and extends to them the dignity of moral accountability.

There are two passages in the Pentateuch that offer some valuable insights into Israel's missional calling: Exodus 19:4-6 and Deuteronomy 26:16-19.

First, Israel's calling is rooted in God's saving action towards her: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod. 19:4). God doesn't simply impose his rule over Israel. He has secured his right to enter into a privileged relationship by liberating her from a terrible oppressor and taking her as his "treasured possession."¹⁰ The most fundamental characteristic of Israel's status as God's people is not in the mere observance of a given set of laws, but in participating in a loving relationship with God.

Second, God's command to Israel to "obey me fully and keep my covenant" (Exod. 19:5) and "to follow these decrees and laws" (Deut. 26:16), does not reflect some arbitrary divine requirement that is simply intended to appease the deity. If God requires obedience, it's because observance of the laws is necessary to give concrete expression to the relationship in which Israel now participates and to display the nature of the living God as a witness to the nations. As Daniel I. Block points out, the missional emphasis expressed in these two passages and, to a large extent, the rest of the Pentateuch emphasizes a centripetal movement. At that stage of Israel's history, the emphasis is on Israel becoming a distinct people: "He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised" (Deut. 26:19). Block describes the mechanism that will attract the attention of the nations:

While the world watched, the Lord delivered Israel from her Egyptian bondage, entered into a covenant relationship with her, put Canaan into her hands, and blessed her. As his covenant partner, his special treasure, and his holy people, Israel became an example of the power of divine grace and glory to the praise, renown, and honor of the Lord. What the Lord had done for Israel he sought to do for all, but like Rahab and Ruth

they must come to Israel... The prevailing formula was simple: demonstrate gratitude for divine grace through loyal living and experience the Lord's blessings, thereby attracting the attention of the nations, who would give praise and glory to the Lord and would join Israel in their covenant relationship with him.¹¹

But this glorious vision of a faithful, prosperous, and righteous Israel will never see the light of day. As the Hebrews become the nation of Israel, their history will be marked by rebellion, idolatry, and injustice. But God will not give up on a people that is hopelessly bent on sinning itself into oblivion. With the covenant in place, the terms of the relationship are explicitly laid out. While God would be morally justified in annihilating his people, he relents. Instead, he invites a special group of men to call the Israelites to uphold their side of the bargain. These men were the prophets of Israel.

The Prophetic Tradition

The Role of the Prophet

The prophet is a mediator to whom is attributed a dual role. If, on the one hand, he is to communicate the Word of God to his people, on the other hand, he speaks to God on behalf of his people. He never positions himself in self-righteous judgment over the people; on the contrary, he stands in complete solidarity with them.

The common thread of the prophetic discourse resides in a condemnation of idolatry. Among the rulers and the upper classes, the idolatrous impulse manifests itself by a concentration of political power that is used to destroy the mechanisms of wealth creation that the "middle class" (farmers, tradesmen, and laborers) depended on to subsist. Among the working class, idolatry was exhibited through a more open worship of Baal. The prophetic discourse does not reflect some ancient pseudo-Marxist manifesto pitting the rich against the poor, but a denunciation of a deeply entrenched self-abandonment to idolatry. Beyond poverty and wealth, what the prophets discern are the structures of death that are strangling Israelite society. The prophet is, in a sense, a cultural pathologist.

The Message

Israel

With respect to Israel, the prophet calls for a radical turnabout from the death impulse that forever emerges from the human heart.¹² While the prophet's primary source of calling, motivation, and discourse resides in his experience of God, his message is anchored in the knowledge of the Torah. The prophet intervenes, because the people of Israel are in "breach of contract."

The prophets are master communicators; they use every rhetorical means at their disposal to command the people's attention and to get their message across.¹³ On some occasions, they would offer a vision of a renewed future in order to stimulate the imagination of the people for what could be if they repented. But as a cursory reading of the prophetic books reveals, the prophets would, more often than not, resort to uttering unimaginably brutal oracles of judgment against the people. While these oracles sometimes appear to announce the utter and final destruction of Israel, their primary function is to bring Israel back from the brink of self-destruction. At the very core of the curse motif, there is a redemptive purpose: the language of annihilation was intended to shock Israel out of its self-induced idolatrous slumber.

We should note, however, that not all is rhetoric and pedagogy. The prophetic oracles of judgment clearly leave the door open to the possibility of actual destruction if the people will heed neither the warnings nor the disasters they have experienced (Amos 4:4-12). The oracles of judgment exploit language that leaves open the possibility of a point of no return. If there is an open horizon relative to the possibility of salvation, there is also an equally open horizon on the eventuality of Israel's destruction.

The Nations

For the most part, the references to the nations are framed in the context of the oracles of judgment, most of which are attested in Amos 1:1-2:3, Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 46-51, and Ezekiel 25-31. These texts were probably not directly intended for the nations as such. They either represented a message of warning for Israel: If the Israelites commit the same sins as the nations, their fate will be similar (cf. Amos 1:1-2:3). Or they may in fact have served as oracles of salvation: God will destroy those who oppress his people (cf. Nah. 1:1-15). Whatever the case might be, a number of prophetic texts do draw attention to God's intent for the nations and Israel's role in reaching out to them.

Three books are entirely devoted to the fate of specific nations. The book of Nahum constitutes a cry of celebration over the destruction of the Assyrians, a people who oppressed much of the ancient world for almost a century. Obadiah represents a word of judgment against the Edomites for siding with the Babylonians when they invaded Judah in 587 B.C. These two books affirm God's sovereignty over all the nations and the reality of God's justice. But they go beyond affirming God's sovereignty and power. They represent a profound source of hope for all those who are oppressed by evil forces, regardless of whether they are Israelite or Gentile. They constitute a confirmation that God is not indifferent to the human condition. He deeply cares for all men and women and will ensure that evil doesn't prevail forever.

The book of Jonah outlines a slightly more complex situation. On the one hand, the narrative also affirms God's righteous sovereignty over the nations. Jonah is mandated to proffer a message of judgment and destruction against the Assyrian city of Nineveh. In that respect, the theological assumptions of the book are entirely consistent with the message of Nahum and Obadiah. Where the book differs is in highlighting God's compassion for the Ninevites. As Jonah rightly infers, God's primary intent is not to destroy that city, but to offer its inhabitants an opportunity to repent and be saved.

The book of Jonah is a powerful reminder of both God's concern for the nations and Israel's role in God's plan of redemption. God choosing Israel as his people was never intended to be an end in and of itself. Israel was chosen to be a vehicle of God's grace to all the nations by reflecting God's character and by proclaiming the Law to the nations. While Nineveh's injustice will not be ignored, the book's conclusion proclaims God's mercy and desire to see all repent and be saved (Jon. 4:11). In fact, the very impetus behind sending a prophet to deliver a message of judgment is in itself an act of mercy, for by so doing, God offers the Ninevites an opportunity to change their ways and be spared. Jonah is particularly significant in that it makes explicit the centrifugal movement implicitly stated in the Abrahamic covenant. Jonah confirms that it was indeed God's intent for Israel to reach out to all the nations, even those who were historically her enemies.

A number of other texts, particularly so in Isaiah,¹⁴ confirm God's redemptive intent for the nations. One of the most notable of these is found in Isaiah 19:24-25:

In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

This passage is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it harks back to the Abrahamic covenant and provides further clarification with respect to the scope of the promise and Israel's role. The three references to blessing in this passage echo the promise to Abraham, where the same root is used five times in Genesis 12:2-3. God states he will bless Egypt and Assyria, and those who are blessed will be a blessing to others. As Israel becomes both an object and an agent of God's blessing, so are these two nations. This is very significant, for this passage virtually erases any distinction between Israel and the nations; Egypt and Assyria are included in the promise on the same footing as Israel. As Christopher Wright states,

So these foreign nations come not only to *experience* blessing but to *be* "a blessing on the earth." In other words, both dynamic movements in God's word to Abraham are at work here. The recipients of the Abrahamic blessing become the agents of it. The principle that those who are

blessed are to be the means of blessing others is not confined to Israel alone, as if Israel would forever be the exclusive transmitters of a blessing that could only be passively received by the rest from their hand. No, the Abrahamic promise is a self-replicating gene. Those who receive it are immediately transformed into those whose privilege and mission it is to pass on to others.¹⁵

In Isaiah 25:6-8, the prophet alludes to a time when God will extend his hospitality to all nations, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine--the best of meats and the finest of wines (25:6).” There are two things to note. First, the banquet metaphor symbolizes the “celebration of God’s rule by people from around the world.”¹⁶ This feast is intended for those who welcome God’s righteous rule (cf. 25:1-5). Second, what makes this passage truly exceptional is the promise that death itself will be eliminated from human experience: “On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever” (25:7-8). The promise also alludes to a time when all tears will be wiped away and there will no longer be any hostility between Israel and the nations (v. 8). God’s sovereign rule is not an opportunity to oppress and enslave, but to bring liberty and life to all.¹⁷

In Jeremiah 4:1-2, the prophet links the fate of the nations to the faithfulness of Israel: “If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray...then the nations will be blessed by him and in him they will glory.” This verse confirms the critical role Israel is called to play with respect to the nations’ salvation. As the promise to Abraham suggests, there is indeed an intimate connection between the fate of Israel and that of the nations. The future of the nations is entirely contingent on Israel’s faithful obedience to God. For better or for worse, true knowledge of God will be mediated through Israel.

The notion of Israel as a blessing to the nations is confirmed by the prophet Zechariah in 8:13: “As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a blessing.” God’s benevolent intent for the nations is confirmed in Zechariah 2:10-11; 8:20-22; 14:9, 16. These passages highlight both the centrifugal and centripetal dimensions of mission. In 2:10-11, God is described as coming and living among the nations, who will, just like Israel, belong to God: “Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you” (2:11). In chapters 8 and 14, it is the centripetal dimension that is emphasized. If 8:20-22 proclaims that one day “many peoples and powerful nations” will march to Jerusalem to consult the God

of Israel. In chapter 14, the prophet proclaims the sovereignty of God throughout the world (v. 9); the eventual destruction of those who stubbornly oppose Jerusalem, and, to all who survive the final conflict, God's renewed invitation to worship him in Jerusalem (v. 16).

While there are other prophetic passages that draw attention to the fate of the nations, the texts we have examined provide an adequate summary of God's intention for them. First, the nations have always been an intrinsic part of God's plan. In their repeated allusions to the nations, the prophets simply reflect the fundamental premise put forward in Genesis 1-11¹⁸ and highlighted in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). God chooses Abraham and his posterity, not to limit salvation to a particular family or ethnic group, but as a means to bring salvation to all the nations. As David J. A. Clines states, the patriarchal narratives represent a form of mitigation of God's judgment on Babel and "a re-affirmation of the divine intentions for humanity."¹⁹ Second, while the nations are ultimately subjected to God's sovereignty, accountable to him, and the recipients of his judgments, God's original intent and ultimate purpose is to reach and redeem them all. The prophetic books propose a twofold, centripetal and centrifugal, strategy in this respect. On the one hand, Israel is to be the kind of people that will display God's glory and, in so doing, be a light that attracts men and women. On the other hand, God's plan also involves an outreach component that involves the transmission of the knowledge of God to all corners of the earth.

The Wisdom Tradition

A Culture Under Siege

In the Hebrew Bible, the wisdom corpus is comprised of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, and some would add the Song of Solomon as well to this list. Wisdom elements are also found in the Psalter (most noticeably in Psalms 37 and 73) and the creation account, where it is most clearly signaled by the life and death thematic attested in Genesis 2:15-17.

During the period in which the wisdom tradition is formalized, extending presumably from the time of Solomon to the post-exilic period, Israel was exposed to the cultures of the great empires of the time: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and perhaps Greece. Since it was by far the possibility of religious assimilation that represented the most serious threat to her existence, wisdom was in great part an attempt at addressing how Israel could preserve her distinct identity as God's people in a world of competing truth claims.

The Object of Wisdom

Hebrew wisdom can be described as “evangelistic” and “pastoral.” It is not, however, evangelistic in the sense that we would normally attribute to it. The primary object of Hebrew wisdom is not the conversion of the outsider. Rather, its purpose is to offer a powerful ideological alternative for the various competing truth claims that tugged, especially so, at Israelite youth, who were most at risk of being drawn away from faith in Yahweh. It is “evangelistic” in that it seeks to convince those who might be considering giving allegiance to other gods to turn to Yahweh. It is pastoral in that it offers faithful Israelites a medium to guide their reflection on some of the most critical dimensions of the Hebrew faith. In a nutshell, biblical wisdom is, at its very core, shaped by a profound polemic and apologetic impulse.

Wisdom and the Nations

In the wisdom tradition, allusions to God’s judgment on the nations or their eventual salvation are rather muted. This is not to suggest that biblical wisdom is altogether silent about their fate. Wright highlights three motifs that suggest both the reality of an open horizon on the outsider and the presence of a missional impulse.²⁰

First, there is interest in discerning wisdom in other cultures. Such appreciation is, for instance, evident in the story of Solomon in which the historian acknowledges the wisdom of “all the men of the east,” the wisdom of Egypt, and of such men as Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol, and the sons of Mahol (1 Kings 4:30-31). The remarkable parallels that have been observed between Proverbs 22:17-24:22 and the Egyptian text, *The Wisdom of Amenemope*, suggest a determination to *critically*²¹ incorporate foreign sapiential insights. Second, by reflecting on human existence more intentionally from the creation traditions rather than those linked to the redemptive story of Israel, wisdom offers a discourse that draws on and points to more explicitly universal premises. Finally, because Israelite wisdom focuses on the universal challenges and difficulties inherent to the human condition (particularly so in Ecclesiastes), it offers a more welcoming platform to engage non-Israelites in dialogue.

It should be noted that while I did not include a separate section on the book of Psalms (mostly because of space constraints), the Psalter does indeed make numerous allusions to the nations and their role in God’s plan of redemption. Even if it should be admitted that the Psalms are primarily designed to be used in worship, the numerous allusions to the nations found in these poems do give us an insight into Israel’s view of the nations. George W. Peters writes,

It is a profound fact that “the hymn of praise is missionary preaching par excellence,” especially when we realize that such missionary preaching is

supported in the Psalms by more than 175 references of a universalistic note relating to the nations of the world. Many of them bring hope of salvation to the nations.²²

As Peters notes, some of the most explicit Psalms in this respect are Psalms 2, 33, 66, 72, 117, and 145. As in the Torah, the prophetic and wisdom texts, we find both the centripetal and centrifugal dimensions of witness. For instance, Psalm 86:9 highlights the nations coming to Israel to worship God: “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.” But in Psalm 67, the poet invokes God’s mercy on Israel so that God’s ways may be known all over the earth: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, Selah, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you” (67:1-3). The psalmist makes here a direct connection between Israel’s well-being and the fate of the nations. While the link between Israel being blessed and the resulting knowledge of God among the nations is not made explicit, the assumption is that this knowledge of God will only be transmitted to the nations if Israel prospers. As in other passages we have examined so far, the expansion of God’s knowledge and his reign is not portrayed at all as the imposition of a totalitarian rule leading to oppression and enslavement. God’s rule is depicted as a win-win proposition for all; the inauguration of a new era where everyone will know God, praise him, and be blessed by him.

May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. Selah. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him (Ps. 67:4-7).

Missional Implications

First Things

The missionary’s primary task is to invite men and women into the Kingdom of God, disciple them, and do everything in their power to enable them to maintain their identity as God’s people in the world. This agenda is at the core of the Torah, the prophets, and the wisdom tradition.

The community of believers is called to reflect God’s character in all aspects of life so as to witness to the nature of the one and only God to all the nations. God’s desire to reach out to his own people and the nations is urgent, constant, and insistent. It is motivated by love and an unquenchable desire to reconcile all men and women to himself.

The Pentateuch

An Invitation. At the heart of God's redemptive project is the invitation to enter into a relationship with him. And because it is to be characterized by love (Deut. 6:4-5), no one can be coerced into it.

The Sickness and the Cure. Missionaries must have a crystal clear understanding of the human predicament and its ultimate cause. In this respect, the creation account, written in order to provide the most basic elements of a new worldview, represents a critical source of information. The story teaches that God is good, and that humans are the primary architects of the terrible condition in which they find themselves. As a result of the Fall, men and women are radically alienated from God and cultivate a visceral hostility towards him (cf. Col. 1:21). But there is hope (Gen. 3:15). God has provided a way out of the situation in which humanity finds itself, but as God's words to Cain highlight, each person is responsible to respond to the invitation to turn away from sin (Gen. 4:6-7).

The Power of God. For most people, making a Christian commitment is an intensely conflicting decision requiring much more than a simple invitation to turn to Christ. Under totalitarian regimes, such a decision may well result in persecution and death. In secular cultures, a commitment to Christ will most often entail a titanic struggle in terms of changing one's center of gravity away from the self to God. In the same way the Hebrews needed to experience the power of God in order to follow Moses out of Egypt, our contemporaries need to feel the power of God to turn to Christ. That may explain why the charismatic movement has had such a deep impact in so many parts of the world, notably and remarkably so in Latin America. It is the task of the missionary to reflect on how to pray for and facilitate an appropriate manifestation of God's power in their context.

God's Self-Disclosure. God constantly discloses himself. The Christian faith is grounded in historical events whose significance is parsed through a number of propositional statements articulated throughout Scripture. Divine revelation is the key to identifying the root cause of the illness that inflicts human nature, the nature of the cure, and the source of the strength we need to live faithfully. Francis of Assisi's so-often rehearsed quote, "Preach the gospel always, and if necessary, use words!" is most likely apocryphal. Without an explicit message, there are, to paraphrase Elton Trueblood, only people who think so highly of themselves and their personal righteousness that they themselves can actually draw a sinner to God. "The person who says naively, 'I don't preach; I just let my life speak,' is insufferably self-righteous."²³

The Prophets

A Sense of Calling and Intimacy with God. The prophet's calling and authority originate from God. His ability to overcome opposition and discouragement also lies in his calling and a continued experience of God. Missionaries can only speak and live out of what they have experienced. This is particularly true in regards to God's grace. The prophet does not speak from a place of self-righteousness. He is himself a recipient of God's grace and speaks as one who has been shown mercy (Isa. 6:1-13).

Theological Clarity. Like the prophet, the missionary must have an unconditional commitment to biblical truth particularly as it pertains to the character of God, the biblical worldview, sin, and redemption. A theologically confused missionary will be an ineffective missionary. Theological clarity is particularly critical with respect to the unique claims of Christ and, in animistic contexts, the character of spiritual warfare and belief in magic. Whether the mission field is here at home or abroad, there is no room for the kind of postmodern Christianity that some have promoted over the past few years.²⁴

Understanding Culture. Just like the prophet, the missionary must have a thorough understanding of the recipient culture in order to recognize the potential points of contact between that culture and the gospel. The cultural investigation that principle assumes should especially highlight the elements of the culture that betray the most evident manifestations of that society's death impulse. Like the prophet, the missionary needs to have a clear view of how sin manifests itself in that culture in order to be in a position to calibrate the presentation of the gospel.

A Difficult Task. The prophetic ministry consistently met with resistance and most often resulted in failure. Confronting a culture or a people group with the claims of Christ always represents an overwhelming challenge. The missionary must be keenly aware of the inherent difficulty of the task and its propensity to miscarry. Communicating God's message is unlike any other enterprise. If some will accept the message and turn to God, many will be indifferent, if not outright hostile.

The Good of the Nation. The prophetic mission was fundamentally driven by a redemptive impulse. The missionary is to be motivated by a similar desire to bring spiritual salvation to all and new life into the recipient culture. Love is to be the root motivator of the missionary's action. Failure to root one's intervention in the love of God and neighbor will result in a discourse crippled by legalism and moralism.

A Personal Change of Allegiance. The prophetic call to turn back to God is infinitely more than uttering platitudinous clichés to some nebulous collective. As Isaiah's call in chapter 6 underlines, there is an irreducible dialectic between the

individual and the community. The work of the missionary must extend beyond vague notions of social justice and the promotion of peace. While some of these objectives may in fact derive naturally from the gospel (such as the abolition of slavery was in the nineteenth century), they are not the *heart* of the gospel. At the core of the Christian message is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. To preach the gospel is to extend an invitation to turn away from self and to accept Christ as Savior and Lord. It is and will always remain an intensely and radically personal process.

The Big Question. The redemption of the individual and that of a nation are not unrelated questions. In the book of Isaiah, the fate of the nation is critical, for the future of God's overall project of redemption is indeed contingent on the survival of a community. The first five chapters of Isaiah outline the disastrous condition of the people. By the end of chapter 5, we cannot avoid asking whether Israel can be saved and if so, how. Chapter 6 provides the answer to that existential question by describing how one man, the prophet Isaiah himself, is cleansed from his sin, transformed, and thus empowered to become Yahweh's partner. The message could not be clearer: A community can be redeemed, but its redemption will be brought about by the redemption of the individual. One transforms a nation through the transformation of one person at a time.

Missionaries work in cultures that are sometimes profoundly infected by sin and evil. Like William Wilberforce, who combatted slavery, or William Carey, who tirelessly labored to eradicate the rite of Sati in India, missionaries may feel compelled, like the prophets of old, to address the evils of a culture, and so they should. While they may resort to using political levers to address those issues, they should never forget that it is ultimately through the transformation of the individual that great social changes are brought about.

The Wisdom Tradition

Reaching Youth. What is most striking about the wisdom tradition is its emphasis on youth. Missionaries should never hesitate to prioritize youth, for young people are often the ones who are most receptive to new religious or ideological options. This also implies that they are most vulnerable to embracing values that may prove to be extremely detrimental. The propensity for urban gangs, for instance, to recruit teenage boys should come as no surprise to anyone, for these boys can most effectively be turned into the kind of heartless "drones" that are so useful to criminal organizations. Young people do, however, have the ability to let their commitment to Christ shape their lives in unexpected ways and to hear God's call to represent the Kingdom in strategic and unexpected places.²⁵

A Spiritual War. At the very core of the wisdom tradition is the conviction that human existence is ultimately about choosing between life and death. But life is much more than an accumulation of days, months, and years. To live is to make choices that either promote life or further spread the spiritual virus that has poisoned human existence since the first two were expelled from the garden. But discerning where life is and actually choosing it will not be always be without its share of struggles and cruel uncertainties. Powerful forces, some inherent to our very nature (Matt. 15:19), some carried by evil ideologies, conspire to compel men and women to adopt the path of death. Wisdom is engaged in a campaign whose ultimate aim is to win the allegiance of the audience; its battlefield the souls of men and women. Mission is anything but some drowsy exercise involving the exchange of religious bromides over a dainty cup of tea. Genuine Christian mission is always about life and death. It's about persuading those who are in the clutches of sin and self-destruction to embrace the source of life: Christ himself. Mission is also about encouraging and enabling those who have embraced the Christian faith to remain faithful to God.

By All Means. Wisdom appeals to a remarkably wide array of interests, desires, fears, and aspirations in order to draw the audience into the “foyer” of the house of wisdom: allusions to prosperity, knowledge, power, peace of mind, health, and long life abound. Wisdom teachers will not hesitate to use the voice of the mother or the father to soften the heart of the indifferent and the rebellious.

Missionaries need to be as creative and strategic as the wisdom teachers in their efforts to capture their audience. Whether they find themselves in a traditional or postmodern culture, the wisdom tradition offers a model of evangelism and discipleship that is centered on dynamic engagement, reflection, and an invitation to change one's allegiances.

Last Things

To address the topic of mission in the Old Testament is to explore how God worked in history to win a rebellious people back to himself, ensure a “landing pad” for Christ's incarnation, and to fulfill the greater plan of redemption for all of humanity.

Notes

¹ For more details, see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Great Commission in the Old Testament,” *International Journal of Frontiers Missions* 13 (1996): 3-7.

² “Missional” is used in its most comprehensive manner as including both discourse and action.

- ³ See for instance Gen. 30:27-30 (Laban and Jacob), Potiphar and Joseph (Gen. 39:5), Pharaoh and Jacob (Gen. 47:7, 10). For a more detailed discussion, see Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), 210-211.
- ⁴ See also 1 Cor. 2:1; Eph. 1:9-11; 3:3-9; Col. 1:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:1-2.
- ⁵ The first seminal expression of the promise of God's ultimate victory over sin can be traced to Gen. 3:15, where the text announces that one of Eve's descendants will eventually crush the serpent's head. The significance of this text does not only lie in its announcement of victory, but in providing an insight into the human/divine partnership mechanism God will engage in order to bring about humanity's redemption (see also Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word, 1987], 80-81).
- ⁶ The landing pad was a concept used by C. S. Lewis to denote God's plan to save humanity one person at a time (see *Mere Christianity* [New York: Harper San Francisco, 2001 (1943)], 40-46).
- ⁷ Elmer Martens examines this theme at length in *God's Design*, 3rd ed. (N. Richland Hills: Bibal Press, 1998).
- ⁸ The text introduces a number of key elements that suggest that this is not the end: 1) the creation account is given to the Hebrews in a context that is located after the Fall, which by implication signals that God's original invitation to humanity extends to the fallen race; 2) if God enacts his judgment against humanity and the created order, God also indicates that the human race will endure (Gen. 1:17-20); 3) God states that the great conflict that has been initiated between the serpent and humanity will ultimately result in the latter's victory over the former (Gen. 3:15).
- ⁹ See P. Gilbert, "Human Freewill and Divine Determinism: Pharaoh, A Case Study," *Direction* 30. (2001):76-87; James K. Hoffmeier, "Egypt, Plagues in," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 374-378.
- ¹⁰ This expression, which appears three times in the book of Exodus (7:6; 14:1; 19:5), denotes God's sovereign election of Israel to be assigned a special status and to reflect God's glory among the nations (for more details, see Daniel I. Block, "The Privilege of Calling: The Mosaic Paradigm for Missions (Deut. 26:16-19)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 397-398.
- ¹¹ Block, "The Privilege of Calling," 404.
- ¹² For an exploration of the prophetic call to conversion, see P. Gilbert, "The Function of Imprecation in Israel's Eighth-Century Prophets," *Direction* 35 (2006): 44-58.
- ¹³ For instance, in some cases the prophet would engage in what scholars call prophetic acts such as Hosea's marriage to a harlot (Hos. 1:2), Isaiah being stripped and barefoot for three years (Isa. 2:3), or Jeremiah buying and wearing a linen belt

around his belt (Jer. 13:1). Such actions served as object lessons intended to underline the sin of the nation and God's imminent judgment against the people.

- ¹⁴ Isa. 19:24-25; 25:6-8; 45:22-2; 60:12. See also Jer. 4:1-2 and Zech. 8:13.
- ¹⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 236.
- ¹⁶ Gary V. Smith, Isaiah 1-39, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 432.
- ¹⁷ Among other Isaiah texts pertinent to mission, see Isa. 42:1-4; 45:22-24; 49:1-6; 60:10-12.
- ¹⁸ In Genesis 2 and 3, Adam and Eve are portrayed as human beings, not Israelites per se. God's plan of redemption announced in Genesis 3:15 is therefore not restricted to the chosen people as such. The table of nations attested in Genesis 10 depicts all the nations of the earth as belonging to one family. According to Block, this document represents the only known example of an attempt to articulate a foundation to relate all the nations of the earth to each other (see Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," *NIDOTT*, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 971). For more details, see M. Daniel Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10 (2000): 24-27.
- ¹⁹ David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series, vol. 10, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997 ([1978]), 85.
- ²⁰ For more details, see Wright, *The Mission of God*, 441-453.
- ²¹ As Wright points out, any borrowing the ancient Israelite wisdom teachers may have engaged in was intentionally filtered through their understanding of who Yahweh was as revealed in the Torah (*The Mission of God*, 443-445, 446-448). See also Elmer Martens, "God, Justice and Religious Pluralism in the Old Testament," in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, eds. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale: HP, 1999), 46-63.
- ²² George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 116.
- ²³ Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (New York: Harper, 1961), 53. David Ewert examines this question in "Evangelism by Lifestyle," *Direction* 28 (1999):18-27.
- ²⁴ See for instance Grant C. Richison's critique of postmodern Christianity in *Certainty* (Pickering: Castle Quay Books, 2010) and D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).
- ²⁵ In this respect, Daniel is an extraordinary example of a young man who managed to contribute to God's project by maintaining a high degree of personal integrity

and by letting God prepare him for an assignment that was critical for the survival of Israel in a foreign land (see P. Gilbert, “Welcome to the Complex Life,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, vol. 45 [September 1, 2006]: 8-9).

Recommended Reading

- Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.
- Martens, Elmer. “Ezekiel’s Contribution to a Biblical Theology of Mission.” *Direction* 28 (1999):75-87.
- Martin-Achard, Robert. *Israël et les nations. La perspective missionnaire de l’Ancien Testament*. Genève, Suisse: Editions Labor et Fides, 1959.
- Martin-Archard, Robert. *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel’s Mission to the World*. Translated by John Penney Smith. Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962.
- Peters, George W. *A Biblical Theology of Missions*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1972.
- Porter, Stanley E. and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds. *Christian Mission: Old Testament Foundations and New Testament Developments*. McMaster New Testament Studies Series 9. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010.
- Vogels, Walter. “Covenant and Universalism: A Guide for a Missionary Reading of the Old Testament.” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 57 (1973):25-32.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006.
- Wright, G. E. “The Old Testament Basis for the Christian Mission.” In *The Theology of Christian Missions*. Edited by G. H. Anderson. New York: McGraw Hill; London: SCM Press, 1961.

Study Questions

1. In light of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, give two examples of how Israel became a blessing to the nations?
2. In the section of the article entitled “The Creation of a New People”, the author describes God’s program to establish a “landing pad” for his invasion of the world. Explain and discuss the meaning of this concept.
3. What is unique to the perspective on mission that is found in each section of the Old Testament: the Torah, the Prophets, and the wisdom literature?
4. Do you have a favorite story or passage in the Old Testament that expresses God’s heart for the nations? If you are in a group, share these with each other.