

# *Continuing Steps Towards a Missional Hermeneutic*<sup>1</sup>

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The contention of this essay is that if we want to hear what God is saying to his people when we read the Scriptures we must employ a missional hermeneutic. Such a statement entails two bold claims that are certainly controversial within biblical studies. A faithful reading of the biblical text enables us to hear what God is saying to his people; that is, hermeneutics and God's address are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, mission is

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an expanded version of a paper "Notes Toward a Framework for a Missional Hermeneutic" given at the AAR/SBL meeting in Washington, D.C., 18 November 2006. This can be accessed at [http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/blue\\_files/Notes%20Toward%20a%20Framework.pdf](http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/blue_files/Notes%20Toward%20a%20Framework.pdf) or <http://www.gocn.org/articles/article.cfm?id=24>. This essay has also drawn from other published materials including my forthcoming book *For the Sake of the World: A Missional Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker) and my "A Critical Examination of David Bosch's Missional Reading of Luke", in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, Anthony C. Thiselton; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 229-264.

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central to a faithful hermeneutic. Mission is not just one of the many things the Bible talks about, but undergirds, shapes, and produces the text so that to read the Bible in a non-missional way is to misread it and misunderstand what God is saying.

On the first claim, Craig Bartholomew correctly observes that “hermeneutics is a sophisticated word for knowing better how to listen to the text so as to hear properly what God is saying to his people, at this time and in this place.”<sup>2</sup> Al Wolters has offered a helpful model that explores this claim. According to Wolters, one of the hallmarks of biblical scholarship in the last two centuries as a result of the Enlightenment faith is the yawning chasm that has opened up between critical readings of Scripture and religiously committed readings. That is, attention to the historical, cultural, and literary (and even theological) details of the text have been separated from hearing God speak today in the text. Like Bartholomew, Wolters wants to see God’s speech and human interpretation as two sides of the same coin. He calls his approach “confessional criticism.” ‘Criticism’ affirms that this is a scholarly analysis that recognises all the human dimensions of the text; ‘confessional’ means that Scripture is the Word of God.

Wolters distinguishes nine levels of biblical interpretation: textual criticism which establishes the text; lexicography which determines the meaning of the words; syntax which resolves the syntactical relation between the words; diachronic literary analysis which traces the prehistory of the canonical text as it stands; synchronic literary analysis which deals with the final form of the text viewed as literature; historical analysis which examines the original historical context; ideological criticism which probes the significance of an author’s social location; redemptive-historical analysis which looks at the text in light of the overarching story that binds the canon together and finds its centre in Jesus Christ, and; confessional discernment which “has

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in “From Ivory Tower to Parish Ministry”, *Images*, Fall 2004, Redeemer University College, 18.

to do with the basic belief that God speaks in the Bible, that he conveys a message to believers of all ages by means of the Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> The relationship between these levels moves in two directions: in a bottom-up relationship the lower levels are foundational for the higher levels. While these various levels of criticism are necessary to hear what God is saying, it would be reductionistic to limit biblical interpretation to them. In a top-down relationship the upper levels will shape the lower levels. On the one hand, lexicography, syntax, diachronic and synchronic literary analysis, historical, ideological and redemptive-historical analysis are all prerequisites for hearing God speak. On the other hand, our theological assumptions and what we believe about the ultimate status and intention of the text will be formative for the levels below. For Wolters, good hermeneutics involves numerous levels, and it is precisely through good hermeneutics that we can hear what God is saying in the text.

Expanding on the level Wolters calls ‘redemptive-historical analysis’ enables us to clarify the second claim: mission is central to biblical interpretation. Since the Bible is a grand narrative which climaxes in Jesus Christ a redemptive-historical reading seeks to understand all the subordinate parts within the whole metanarrative and in relation to its centre – Jesus Christ. Thus we need a Christocentric reading of Scripture. Christopher Wright develops this further: a redemptive-historical interpretation is not only messianic but missional.<sup>4</sup> Referring to

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<sup>3</sup> Albert M. Wolters, “Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah”, in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, Karl Möller; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Wright comments: “Down through the centuries, it would be fair to say, Christians have been good at their messianic reading of the Old Testament, but inadequate (and sometimes utterly blind) in their missional reading of it. ... a messianic reading of the Old Testament has to flow onto a missional reading ...” in Christopher J. H. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology”, *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, Robin Parry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 108.

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Luke 24:45-47<sup>5</sup> Wright argues that Jesus himself articulates a hermeneutic that is both Christocentric and missional. He elaborates ‘what is written’ in the Old Testament story in terms of its centre and climax in Jesus and the mission of the church to the world.

He [Jesus] seems to be saying that the whole of the Scriptures (which we now know as the Old Testament), finds its focus and fulfilment both in the life and death and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah and in the mission to all nations, which flows out from that event. Luke tells us that with these words Jesus ‘opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures’, or, as we might put it, he was setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures is from a perspective that is both messianic and missional.<sup>6</sup>

He rightly suggests that “down through the centuries it would probably be fair to say that Christians have been good at their messianic reading of the Old Testament but inadequate (and sometimes utterly blind) at their mission reading of it.”<sup>7</sup>

Since the term ‘mission’, and its more recent adjectival form ‘missional’, carries so much mistaken semantic weight, these words must be briefly elaborated. Mission is often understood to refer to something the church does to bring the gospel to other

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<sup>5</sup> “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’” (Lk.24:45-47 TNIV).

<sup>6</sup> C. Wright, “Mission as Matrix”, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 30.

parts of the world or to unbelievers. While evangelism, service projects, church-planting, cross-cultural missions and the like are certainly important parts of the missional calling of the church, a missional hermeneutic assumes a much broader and deeper understanding of mission. Wright captures it in the following words: “In short, a missional hermeneutic proceeds from the assumption that the whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.”<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of mission focuses attention on a number of assumptions that are important for a missional hermeneutic. First, the Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption. All characters and parts of this story must be understood in terms of this unified narrative plot line.<sup>9</sup> Thus to rightly understand God, his people, and their relationship to the world one must see how each is rendered in this story. Second, this story is about God’s mission to restore the creation from sin. Mission is used here in the general sense of a “long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieved through proximate objective and planned actions.”<sup>10</sup> Mission is first of all about what God is doing for the renewal of his creation; God’s mission is theologically prior to any talk about the mission of God’s people. Third, God carries out his redemptive purposes by choosing a community to partner with him in his redemptive work. The mission of God’s people must be understood in terms of participation, at God’s calling and command, in God’s own mission to the world. Fourth, the existence of God’s people is for the sake of the world. The community God has chosen exists to bring God’s saving love and power to a world under the sway of sin. This mission defines their identity and role in the world.

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<sup>8</sup> C. Wright, “Mission as Matrix”, 122.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say the Bible gives us a tidy and simple plot or story. Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 92-93. I allude to this below.

<sup>10</sup> C. Wright, “Mission as Matrix”, 104.

Another way of saying this is to say that in the biblical story we see closely connected God's mission, Israel's mission, Jesus' mission, and the church's mission. God's mission is to redeem the world from sin. God chooses Israel to be a light to the nations, and a channel of God's redemption to the world. When Israel fails in her task, Jesus takes up and successfully accomplishes that mission. He gathers a renewed Israel and sends them to continue the mission he has begun. This mission defines the existence of the church until Christ returns. The Bible then is a product of and witness to this mission.<sup>11</sup> Thus a missional understanding becomes a "central hermeneutical key" by which we interpret any part of Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in biblical studies mission has not been a central category for interpretation. Perhaps this highlights the distorting presuppositions that shape biblical scholarship. Our reading of texts is shaped by what Gadamer refers to as anticipatory fore-structures or 'prejudices' that orient our interpretation. These interpretive categories allow us to enter into dialogue and interpret the text, which is likewise engaged with the self-same matter at hand. As Lash puts it:

If the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be 'heard' today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be 'heard' as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness. And if they are to be thus heard, they must first be articulated in terms available to us within *our*

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<sup>11</sup> C. Wright, "Mission as Matrix", 103, 120. Wright offers a helpful way of making the point that mission is central to the Biblical story. We can speak of a biblical basis for mission but just as meaningfully speak of a missional basis for the Bible. We could not say that about work or marriage. For example, we can speak of a biblical basis for marriage but not of a marital basis for the Bible, (106).

<sup>12</sup> C. Wright, "Mission as Matrix", 108.

cultural horizons. There is thus a sense in which the articulation of what the text might ‘mean’ today is a necessary condition of hearing what that text ‘originally meant.’<sup>13</sup>

The problem is that our ‘missional anticipatory structures’ have been closed by a non-missional self-understanding making us unaware of the centrality of mission in the Scriptures. In an article written almost thirty years ago Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states this clearly.

Exegetical inquiry often depends upon the theological and cultural presuppositions with which it approaches its texts. Historical scholarship therefore judges the past from the perspective of its own concepts and values. Since for various reasons religious propaganda, mission, and apologetics are not very fashionable topics in the contemporary religious scene, these issues have also been widely neglected in New Testament scholarship.<sup>14</sup>

Today we are moving into a changed setting. Our culture is increasingly less influenced by the gospel; the church has lost its place of privilege and is pushed to the margins. Consequently, there is growing in the Western church a “raised consciousness of mission.”<sup>15</sup> Can this new setting re-open our “missional

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<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Lash, “What Might Martyrdom Mean?”, *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985), 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. 1976. “Miracles, Mission, and Apologetics: An Introduction”, *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Elisabeth S. Fiorenza (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Lucien LeGrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*. (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), xiv.

anticipatory structures”?<sup>16</sup> Can the work of contemporary missiology pose questions to the biblical text that helps recover the essential missionary thrust of Scripture? Specifically what would a missional reading look like?

## **The Historical Development Toward a Missional Hermeneutic**

There have been significant strides taken toward a missional hermeneutic in the second half of the last century. The problem of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an impasse between missiologists and biblical scholars on how to approach the biblical text. There are two issues that produced this impasse. The first is concerned with the *historical conditioning* of the biblical text: what is the relation between the ancient text and the contemporary situation? Biblical scholars oriented by the spirit of the Enlightenment insisted on an uncommitted approach to Scripture and in turn produce a “distancing effect” by which the text becomes a strange object to be examined and dissected rather than heard and obeyed.<sup>17</sup> Consequently biblical scholars were reticent to draw any kind of direct connection between the text and our situation. By contrast missiologists, seeking contemporary relevance, frequently failed to respect the cultural distance between text and context, and thus read their own concerns and narrow view of mission back into the biblical

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<sup>16</sup> In his 2003 Epworth Institute lectures entitled *Recovering Mission-Church: Reframing Ecclesiology in Luke-Acts* Joel Green speaks of a missional ‘reframing’: “... where we stand helps to direct our gaze and influences what we see in Scripture. With the image of “reframing” I want to call to our attention the way picture frames draw out different emphases in the pictures they hold. Similarly, even if the essential nature of the church has not changed, new frames bring to the forefront of our thinking and practices fresh emphases. If we take seriously the missional orientation of the work of Jesus and his followers as these are narrated in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, what do we see?”

<sup>17</sup> David Bosch, “Toward a Hermeneutic for ‘Biblical Studies and Mission’”, *Mission Studies* III 1986 (2), 72.

text. Sometimes they were guilty of simplistic or obvious moves from the New Testament to their missionary setting in an attempt to make a direct application of Scripture to the present situation.

Not only did biblical scholars emphasize the historical conditioning of the text, they also stressed the tremendous literary, theological, and semantic *diversity* of the scriptural record. Thus biblical scholarship became a highly specialized science in which biblical scholars seldom looked beyond their own fields of competence. Missiologists, on the other hand, tended to overlook this rich diversity and reduced their biblical foundation for mission to a single word, idea, or text as the unifying hermeneutical framework for approaching Scripture.

Three developments offer signs of hope for a move beyond this impasse that might help to restore a missional hermeneutic: the development of a much broader understanding of mission that has been expressed in terms of the *missio Dei*; the challenge to higher criticism of new forms of biblical interpretation influenced by, for example, hermeneutical philosophy; and, the entry into the field of scholars who combined a sophisticated understanding of both biblical studies and missiology.

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a deepening and broadening understanding of mission. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century mission was understood rather narrowly as a geographical movement from a Christian nation to a mission field to win converts and plant churches. Mission advocates focussed on certain texts and detached incidents from Scripture that authenticated this view of mission. Toward the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a broadening understanding of mission caused mission scholars to return to the Bible afresh. The division of the world into the Christian West and the pagan non-West, and the separation of mission and church as two different enterprises began to break down. The International Missionary Council held in Willingen, Germany (1952) offered a new theological paradigm for mission — the *missio Dei*. The concept of the *missio Dei*

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emerged as an organizing structure that allowed numerous insights from the past twenty-five years to be co-ordinated.

This coincided with the biblical theology movement, which had shaped the ecumenical movement during the decades of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>18</sup> Johannes Blauw was commissioned by the World Council of Churches to survey and appraise the current work in biblical scholarship and to bring those insights to bear on the mission of the church in light of this new understanding of mission. Blauw produced a little book that demonstrated the centrality of mission to the main story line of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> It expressed a growing consensus in mission studies concerning Scripture and mission, and served as the major work for Bible and mission until the mid 1970s. New developments in biblical studies and significant changes in the world church rendered Blauw's work inadequate. During the 1970s and 1980s many scholars who combined expertise in both mission and biblical studies returned to the issue of the Bible and mission producing a number of valuable studies. Perhaps the book by Roman Catholic scholars Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller is the most noteworthy work to be produced during this period.<sup>20</sup>

While there has been much good work done in the last two decades, two men in particular stand out. David Bosch<sup>21</sup> and

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<sup>18</sup> Michael G. Cartwright, "Hermeneutics", *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (ed. Nicholas Lossky et. al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 454.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961).

<sup>20</sup> Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983). In fact, because of Vatican II which defined the church as missionary by its very nature, Roman Catholic scholars were well ahead of Protestant scholars in working toward a missional hermeneutic.

<sup>21</sup> J. G. Du Plessis notes that Bosch's "extensive bibliography leaves the professional exegete somewhat astounded at the range of his biblical scholarship" and that he must be "reckoned as a formidable exegete with a comprehensive and penetrating knowledge of trends in biblical scholarship" (Du Plessis, "For Reasons of the Heart: A Critical Appraisal of David J. Bosch's Use of Scripture in the Foundation of Christian Mission", *Missionalia* 18:1 (April 1990), 76.

Christopher Wright have taken great strides toward a missional hermeneutic. Bosch produced a number of works in this area,<sup>22</sup> but the arrival of *Transforming Mission* was a watershed, certainly in theology of mission, but also in the area of a missional hermeneutic. It gathered up the insights and steps taken toward a missional hermeneutic, and gave sophisticated expression to a missional reading of Matthew, Luke, and Paul.<sup>23</sup> A number of significant themes appear in the corpus of his work that advance a more consistent missional hermeneutic: mission as a central thrust of Scripture's message, the centrality of the *missio Dei*, various mission theologies rooted in the mission of Jesus, the missionary identity of the church, the broad scope of mission centred in the comprehensive salvation of the kingdom of God, the communal dimension of mission, a hermeneutic of 'consonance' or historical logic that enables the ancient missionary paradigms of the New Testament to speak authentically to the present. This last point expresses a hermeneutical approach that challenged the Enlightenment dogma which believed that a hermeneutical method could give such critical distance ("spectator exegesis") that one could come to the text in a neutral way ("the principle of the empty head"<sup>24</sup>). In line with the insights of literary critics and philosophers

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<sup>22</sup> David Bosch, "The Why and How of a True Biblical Foundation for Mission", *Zending op Weg Naar de Toekomst: Essays aangeboden aan prof. Dr.J. Verkuyl* (Kampen: Kok Publishers, 1978); "Mission in Biblical Perspective", *International Review of Mission* (October 1985), 531-538; "Toward a Hermeneutic for 'Biblical Studies and Mission'", *Mission Studies III* 1986 (2), 65-79; Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission, *Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Christian Mission*, eds. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 175-192.

<sup>23</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

A book that follows in the tradition of Bosch but moves beyond Matthew, Luke and Paul to most of the other books of the New Testament is Johannes Nissen's *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 157.

Bosch's approach worked toward a fusion of the biblical and contemporary horizons in a way that took seriously one's own interpretive location as well as the historical conditioning and diversity of the biblical text.

The development toward a missional hermeneutic has appropriated the insights of Bosch and has continued to move toward a more consistent expression of the centrality of mission in Scripture. The most helpful articulation of a missional hermeneutic to date is Christopher Wright's work.<sup>25</sup> Wright wants to move beyond biblical foundations for mission, beyond multicultural hermeneutics, beyond use of the Bible to support the world mission of the church, beyond important themes in Scripture for mission, to a missional hermeneutic, that is a hermeneutic that recognizes the centrality of mission in the biblical story. For Wright mission is what the biblical story is all about: "Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, 'what it is all about.'"<sup>26</sup> "Mission is" says Wright, "a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture."<sup>27</sup> One aspect of Wright's work that enables him to outline a more consistent missional hermeneutic is his attention to the Old Testament. Much earlier work in Bible and mission gives scant attention to the Old Testament. Wright correctly believes that the Old Testament has not played the role it should, and his work goes a long way toward its recovery.

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology", *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, Robin Parry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 102-143 ; *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2006); "Old Testament Perspectives on Mission", *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (ed. John Corrie; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 269-273.

<sup>26</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 17.

Wright's work has set a direction that needs to be continued. This essay continues on that path of expressing a consistently missional reading of Scripture. To frame the remainder of this essay I want to use the language of the Christian Reformed Church's confession *Our World Belongs to God*: "The Bible is the Word of God, *record* and *tool* of his redeeming work."<sup>28</sup> The Bible is a *record* of God's mission through his people for the sake of the world. The Bible is also a *tool* in God's mission for shaping his people for their mission in the world.

### **Scripture as a Record of God's Mission**

The Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption against the backdrop of creation and humanity's fall into sin.<sup>29</sup> Stressing the narrative character of Scripture is not, of course, to deny the other genres of literature that make up our canon. Newbigin rightly says that "the Bible is essentially narrative in form. ... It contains, indeed, much else: prayer, poetry, legislation, ethical teaching, and so on. But essentially it is a story."<sup>30</sup> While for James Barr, the status of story would differ from that of Newbigin, he also notes:

. . . in my conception all of the Bible counts as 'story.' A people's story is not necessarily purely narrative: materials of many kinds may be slotted

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<sup>28</sup> *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987), paragraph 35.

<sup>29</sup> One could argue for the narrative unity of Scripture on three bases: 1) Formation of the canon which presupposes the narrative unity of a collection of books; 2) The tradition of the church of reading Scripture as one story; 3) Warrant from Scripture itself. Of course, the last is most important. An excellent summary of that Scriptural authorization can be found in Richard Bauckham's article, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story", in Ellen F. David and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 40-47.

<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1995), 81.

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into a narrative structure. . . . although not all parts of the Bible are narrative, the narrative character of the story elements provides a better framework into which the non-narrative parts may be fitted than any framework based on the non-narrative parts into which the story elements could be fitted.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover speaking of the Bible as one story is not to say that it is like a single volume with a tight-woven story-line with no loose ends, like a conventional plot in a novel, or a modern work of history. Richard Bauckham observes that “the Bible does *not* have a carefully plotted single story-line, like, for example a conventional novel. It is a sprawling collection of narratives along with much non-narrative material that stands in a variety of relationships to the narratives. . . .” He points to the fact that there are divergent ways of telling the story, a plurality of angles on the same subject matter, the profusion and sheer untidiness of narrative materials, and more. All of this means that “any sort of *finality* in summarizing the biblical story is inconceivable.”<sup>32</sup> Yet in its basic overall structure the Bible does tell an overarching story.

While finality in telling the story is inconceivable it is important to tell the story. Bauckham rightly adds, “summaries of the biblical story are more or less essential.”<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright agrees: An essential part of our theological and missional task today is to “tell this story as clearly as possible, and to allow it to

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<sup>31</sup>James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 356. I would use the category of ‘story’ differently than Barr. He used it to side-step questions of historicity. For me the historicity of the biblical story, especially its central events in Christ, are essential to the story.

<sup>32</sup>Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 92-93.

<sup>33</sup>Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 93.

subvert other ways of telling the story of the world . . .”<sup>34</sup> An important part of our task in this essay, then, is to tell the story of God’s mission in and through his people.<sup>35</sup>

Further, the Bible purports to tell a true story with a claim to universal validity. Chris Wright puts it this way:

That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense. My point is much greater however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the* story or, rather, as part of that ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope. In other words, in reading these texts we are invited to embrace a metanarrative, a grand narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Or as N. T. Wright correctly notes, the divine drama told in Scripture “offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”<sup>37</sup>

Central to this story is God’s mission to restore the creation and his election of a people to bear that purpose in their lives for the sake of the world. It is this mission that is a central thread in the biblical story. As David Filbeck puts it:

Indeed, it is this missionary dimension, so often neglected in modern theological interpretation, that unifies both Old and New Testaments and coordinates their various themes into a single

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<sup>34</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 132.

<sup>35</sup> See my “The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story”, *Theology Today*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (January 2008), 469-483. Craig Bartholomew and I have attempted to tell the story for an undergraduate readership in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Books, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 54-55.

<sup>37</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 41-42.

motif . . . In short, the dimension of missions in the interpretation of the Scriptures gives structure to the whole Bible. Any theological study of the Scriptures, therefore, must be formulated with the view of maintaining this structure. The missionary dimension to the interpretation of the Old Testament as displayed in the New Testament, I believe, accomplishes this in a way that no other theological theme can hope to match.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, Israel's, Jesus', and the church's mission to participate in God's redemptive work is a major key to unlocking the Bible's story. We turn to that story beginning with Israel's mission.<sup>39</sup>

### **Israel's Missional Role and Identity in the Old Testament Story**

To use the word 'mission' with respect to Israel and the Old Testament requires clarification. Robert Martin-Achard is helpful in this regard. He distinguishes mission from three other concepts that emerge in the Old Testament story—universalism, incorporation of foreigners, and proselytism.<sup>40</sup> Universalism asserts that the God of Scripture is the only God, Creator and Lord of the earth, but does not take the next step of assigning Israel any particular responsibility toward the nations in

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<sup>38</sup> David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 1994), 10.

<sup>39</sup> I have noted the danger of allowing a single word, concept, or text to put the diversity of Scripture into a straightjacket of uniformity. It is possible also to allow a single narrative or single definition of mission to do the same thing. The narrative that follows deals with some key texts and is suggestive of at least one way to read the text missionally. I can do no more in the confines of one brief article. Chris Wright's 500 plus page book *Mission of God* is helpful opening up numerous ways of telling the story faithful to the text.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World* (trans. John Penney Smith; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 3-5.

bringing them to acknowledge him. The Bible is indeed universal in proclaiming the LORD to be the one and only God, but it is also clear that Israel does have a task with respect to the nations. The incorporation of foreigners (*ger*) into Israel's community is also an element found frequently in the Old Testament story.<sup>41</sup> Foreigners adopted the group obligations—ethnic, social, and religious—and became full-fledged members of the covenant community of Israel.<sup>42</sup> While the laws that governed the incorporation of foreigners were consistent with Israel's missional character, and thus different from the nations round about,<sup>43</sup> this was a natural process of assimilation that did not necessarily result from Israel's unique calling in the world but was also observed among Israel's neighbours. Proselytism of Gentiles was a vigorous activity in Judaism that reached its climax during the time of Jesus and the apostles.<sup>44</sup> Proselytism was individualistic and nationalistic activity. It was a private enterprise undertaken by individuals and directed toward particular persons and aimed at incorporating Gentiles into the Jewish nation. Over against, especially the individualism of this activity, "the concept of mission involves the belief that the whole community has a task to fulfil on behalf of all mankind."<sup>45</sup>

A couple more definitions by Chris Wright can clarify more positively what exactly Israel's task was on behalf of all humankind. (1) "*Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's*

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<sup>41</sup> See the helpful discussion of this issue in Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 41-48.

<sup>42</sup> David M. Eichorn, *Conversion to Judaism: History and Analysis* (New York: Ktav, 1966), 3ff.

<sup>43</sup> DeRidder comments that the "legislation under which Israel's covenant life was lived is seen as being unique in that ancient world. The pagan world knew nothing comparable to the Torah of Israel which gave full recognition to the resident alien and made specific regulation for his full incorporation into the life of the people" (*Discipling the Nations*, 47).

<sup>44</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Promise to the Nations*. Studies in Biblical Theology No. 24 (London: SCM Press, 1958), 11-19. Cf. Matt. 23:15.

<sup>45</sup> Martin-Achard, *Light to the Nations*, 5.

people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of the world for the redemption of God's creation."<sup>46</sup> Mission is first of all God's mission, what God is doing for the sake of the world; it is his long-term purpose to renew the creation including people from all nations and the whole range of human life. Israel is missional by its very nature in that it is taken up into this work for the sake of the nations. (2) "God's mission involves God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations."<sup>47</sup> This second definition gives us a sense of how God will employ his people in his mission. He will make them an appealing display people who embody God's original creational intention and eschatological goal for human life. He will come and dwell among them and give them his *torah* to direct them to live in the way of the Lord. As such his people will be an attractive sign before all nations of the goal toward which God is moving — the restoration of the creation and human life from the corruption of sin. So, contrary to widespread definitions of mission, Israel's mission was, in short, "to *be* something, not go somewhere."<sup>48</sup>

There are two orientations that define the missional identity and role of God's people: chosen by *God* for the sake of the *world*. The church does not exist for itself. Rather, it exists for the sake of God's mission and for the sake of others toward whom God's mission is directed. These are the two poles that define the function of God's people. They are chosen by God: Israel's identity can only be understood in terms of being chosen to play a role in God's mission. They live for the sake of the world: God's purpose is to bring his salvation to all nations, indeed the whole creation. God's people exist as the place where God begins his work of restoration and then as a channel whereby that salvation flows to all the nations.

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<sup>46</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 22-23. Emphasis his.

<sup>47</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 470.

<sup>48</sup> C. Wright, "Old Testament Perspectives on Mission", 271.

**TWO PROGRAMMATIC TEXTS — ONE HERMENEUTICAL LENS ON THE BIBLICAL STORY**

There are two texts in the Old Testament which together offer a helpful hermeneutical lens to view the entire Old Testament story. In the first, God outlines his redemptive plan to Abraham in a promise. God will make Abraham into a great nation, and through that nation bring blessing to all nations. In the second, God spells out the role this nation will play in bringing blessing to the nations. The remainder of the Old Testament traces a story of how faithful Israel is to their calling.

**1. Genesis 12:2-3: Blessed to Be a Blessing**

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth

will be blessed through you (Gen. 12:1-3  
TNIV).

This “stupendous utterance”<sup>49</sup> made to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3 is set in the context of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Indeed, those first chapters pose the problem to which the promise to Abraham is the solution. These chapters are universal in scope: God is the creator the heavens and the earth, and is Lord of all the nations. Sin pollutes all cultures of humankind and

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<sup>49</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” (trans. Wilbur A. Benware) *Interpretation* 20. 2 (1966), 140.

likewise God's judgement on sin is universal. In reference to Genesis 3-11 Gerhard Von Rad speaks of the author's "great hamartiology", his focus on sin, its effects, its consequences and God's judgment. Now, in Genesis 12 the biblical story narrows from its universal scope to a particular focus; from all nations God centres his attention on one man and one nation. The bad news of sin, alienation, curse and judgment on all nations is met with a promise of good news: God has chosen one man to bring blessing back to his creation and to all peoples.

Paul Williamson speaks correctly of a "twofold agenda"<sup>50</sup> in Genesis 12:1-3. Abraham is first of all to be formed into a great nation and be a recipient of God's covenantal blessing. But the purpose is, secondly, so that all nations on earth might be blessed. This final clause 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' is "the principal statement of these three verses." It is a "result clause" which indicates that the final goal of God's election and blessing of Abraham is the salvation of the nations.<sup>51</sup> Thus the "*election of [Abraham and] Israel is fundamentally missional, not just soteriological. . . . God's calling and election of Abraham was not merely so that he should be saved . . . It was rather, and more explicitly, that he and his people should be instruments through whom God would gather that multinational multitude that no man or woman can number. . . . it is first of all election into mission.*"<sup>52</sup>

We are not told precisely how Abraham will be a blessing to all nations. That will be given further clarification in Exodus 19:3-6. However, already in Genesis 18:18-19 we are given a clue. It will happen as Abraham and his family "keep the way of the Lord" and do "what is right and just." Both phrases point to a life that God's people live in God's way before the nations.

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Williamson, "Covenant", in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 145.

<sup>51</sup> William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 64-65.

<sup>52</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 263-264.

## 2. Exodus 19:3-6: Priestly Kingdom and Holy Nation

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession because the whole earth is mine.<sup>53</sup> You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites (Ex. 19:3-6).

The means by which God will bring blessing to the nations is given more detail in Exodus 19:3-6. These “programmatically” verses describe the birth of God’s people. The book of Exodus is not a “literary or theological goulash” but rather has a “theological unity” that is reflected in its literary structure.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the literary structure has profound theological implications for the missional identity and role of God’s people in the biblical story.

The first eighteen chapters narrate the *redemption* of Israel from slavery in Egypt. For many of us, redemption is just one more word in a large biblical catalogue of theological concepts to describe salvation. However, here in Exodus it draws on a

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<sup>53</sup> I have departed here from the TNIV which ends the sentence after ‘treasured possession’ and then begins a new one ‘Although the whole earth is mine . . .’ The translation I offer indicates the reason or goal of God’s choice and call of Israel. The whole earth belongs to God and he chooses Israel and calls them to be a holy nation and priestly kingdom to take it back. See discussion and footnote below on this phrase.

<sup>54</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), xxi.

familiar cultural and social image. A redeemer was a family member who was responsible to recover family lives or goods that had fallen into bondage.<sup>55</sup> Redemption could involve the liberation of a relative from slavery and restoring them to their original family relationship (cf. Lev. 25:47-55). Here, as Redeemer, God acts to free his firstborn son from slavery to Pharaoh to restore him to his rightful place in God's family (Ex. 4:22-23). This redemption of a son "contains the essence of the meaning of the entire exodus story."<sup>56</sup> Since Pharaoh was considered to be an incarnation of the Egyptian god Re,<sup>57</sup> and since pagan religion shaped all of the political, social, and economic life of Egypt,<sup>58</sup> this redemption was a profoundly *religious* liberation. Israel was freed to serve the LORD in every area of their lives.

In the Exodus, the power of the suzerain is broken; the pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt, was defeated and therefore lost his right to be Israel's suzerain lord; the Lord conquered the pharaoh and therefore ruled as King over Israel (Exod. 15:18). As their deliverer, God had claimed the right to call for his people's obedient commitment to him in the covenant.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Proksch, 'Luo', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, Volume IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 266-268.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Magonet, "The Rhetoric of God: Exodus 6.2-8", *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983), 65.

<sup>57</sup> Edward Mason Curtis, *Man as the Image of God in Genesis in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1984; Reproduced Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1985), 86-96; J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 108-111.

<sup>58</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>59</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 83.

In chapters 19-24 God establishes a covenant people. Covenants were common instruments employed by the Hittite and Egyptian world empires of Moses' day so it should not surprise us that God also employs the familiar notion of covenant to bind his people to himself.<sup>60</sup> But what made this such a suitable image? Peter Craigie offers an answer: "Like the other small nations that surrounded her, Israel was to be a vassal state, but not to Egypt or the Hittites; she owed her allegiance to God alone."<sup>61</sup>

But why had God — the Lord of all nations — liberated this one small nation? What role does God have for them to play? The answer is offered in Exodus 19:3-6. Here we find the "unique identity of the people of God."<sup>62</sup> And it will be this "special role" which will become a "lens through which Israel is viewed throughout the rest of the Bible."<sup>63</sup> God promised that Abraham would become a great nation that would bring blessing to the whole earth. The book of Exodus shows the formation of that nation, and specifically Exodus 19:3-6 tells us how Israel will accomplish that role.

Three terms are used to describe Israel in their identity and role in God's mission: treasured possession, priestly kingdom, and holy nation. Israel was chosen as a treasured possession to play a priestly role as a holy nation. Israel would play a priestly

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<sup>60</sup> The remarkable similarity between Old Testament covenants, especially in Exodus 19-24 and Deuteronomy, has been explored thoroughly for the last half decade in biblical scholarship. Cf., for example, George E. Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law", *Biblical Archaeologist* 17, 2 (1954): 26-46; Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17, 3 (1954): 49-76. It is much more debatable to suggest, as I intimate here, that the Pharaoh employed a covenant with Israel. Craigie offers evidence that vassal covenants were employed by Egypt to subject foreign labor groups within Egypt. This raises the real possibility that the Pharaoh would have been viewed by Israel as their covenant Lord (*Deuteronomy*, 23, 79-83).

<sup>61</sup> Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>63</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, xiii.

role living as a model before and mediator to the nations. Israel would be a holy nation, living a distinctive life before the nations. We may summarise the significance of these labels in terms of Israel's call to mediate God's salvation to the nations as they lived before the nations a communal life that embodied God's design for human life. As Durham points out, Israel was to "be a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people."<sup>64</sup> As a holy nation Israel was to be "a societary model for the world", a picture of what God intends for the whole world — human life under God's authority.<sup>65</sup> The universal horizon of God's action in choosing Israel and in making them a priestly kingdom and a holy nation is clearly in view in the words "because the whole earth is mine" (v. 5).<sup>66</sup> All the nations belong to God and His choice of Israel is to call them back.

Israel was to live out God's creational intentions for human life as a picture of the goal toward which God was moving—the renewal of all of human life. As such Israel's life would be attractive. To use the later language of Isaiah, Israel was to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6). Or to use the language of an older missiology, Israel's mission was centripetal: their life was to be attractive so as to draw the nations into covenant with God.

God's people living in God's way before the nations: this is how we have described mission. Thus we are not surprised that immediately upon the heels of this call the *torah* is given to guide Israel in living out their calling as a holy nation (Ex. 20-23). This

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<sup>64</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 263.

<sup>65</sup> Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Dumbrell rightly notes that phrase "because the whole earth is mine" should be understood "not as the assertion of the right to choose but as the reasons or goal for choice" ("The Prospect of the Unconditionality of the Sinaitic Covenant", in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 146. Cf. Fretheim translates this 'because the whole earth is mine' and notes that this links this text with the missional purpose of God first articulated to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 ("Because the Whole Earth is Mine", 237).

instruction, which would be significantly expanded in Deuteronomy before Israel entered the land, covered the full spectrum of human life. It pointed back to God's creational intention for human life, now set contextually in this ancient near eastern setting. "The people of God in both testaments are called to be a light to the nations. But there can be no light to the nations that is not shining already in transformed lives of a holy people."<sup>67</sup>

The final chapters of Exodus deal with the tabernacle and the story of Israel's rebellion with the golden calf (Ex. 25-40). Together we see that the final brick in the building of God's people in Exodus is God's *presence*: As holy yet merciful and forgiving (Ex. 34:6-7), God comes to dwell in their midst. God will now carry out his mission to bring blessing to the nations as he lives among Israel as their divine king. Martin-Achard calls attention to the importance of this for mission: "The evangelisation of the world is not primarily a matter of words or deeds: it is a matter of presence — *the presence of the People of God in the midst of mankind and the presence of God in the midst of His people*. And surely it is not in vain that the Old Testament reminds the Church of this truth."<sup>68</sup>

Thus the book of Exodus renders to us the identity and role of God's people: they are a redeemed people (Ex. 1-18), a covenant people (Ex. 19-24), and a people in whom God dwells (Ex. 25-40). God's work of forming a people finds its focus and goal in the calling to be a priestly kingdom and holy nation before the watching eyes of the surrounding nations (Ex. 19:3-6). As Durham says of these verses: "This special role becomes a kind of lens through which Israel is viewed throughout the rest of the Bible ... It is this special role, indeed, that weaves the Book of Exodus so completely into the canonical fabric begun with Genesis and ended only with Revelation."<sup>69</sup> Or, as Dumbrell puts it even more

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<sup>67</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 358.

<sup>68</sup> Martin-Achard, *Light to the Nations*, 79.

<sup>69</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, xxiii.

strongly: “The history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation.”<sup>70</sup>

**ON DISPLAY IN THE LAND: ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS**

Thus Genesis 12:2-3 and Exodus 19:3-6 provide a hermeneutical lens through which to read the Old Testament, indeed the entire biblical story. Duane Christensen rightly comments that “‘Israel as a light to the nations’ is no peripheral theme within the canonical process. The nations are the matrix of Israel’s life, the *raison d’être* of her very existence.”<sup>71</sup> Chris Wright agrees: “God’s mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is *God’s mission in relation to the nations*, arguably more than any other theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative.”<sup>72</sup>

In the Old Testament the ‘nations’ is a theological category:<sup>73</sup> they are viewed from the standpoint of their relation to God and to Israel, God’s covenant people. Negatively, the nations are alienated from God and under his judgment. In their idolatry they also pose a threat to Israel. Positively, they belong to God by virtue of creation and are subject to his divine rule over all history. Ultimately, they are the object of God’s redemptive activity in Israel.

Israel is placed on the land to shine as a light in the midst of and for the sake of the nations. They are placed at the crossroads of the nations and the navel of the universe<sup>74</sup> as an appealing

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<sup>70</sup> Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80.

<sup>71</sup> Duane L. Christensen, “Nations”, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday 1992), 4:1037.

<sup>72</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 455. My emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 67.

<sup>74</sup> A number of Jewish and rabbinic texts situate Israel at the center of the world, as the navel of the universe. For example, Midrash Tanchuma, Perashat

display people visible to the surrounding peoples.<sup>75</sup> From this point on “Israel knew that it lived under constant surveillance of the then contemporary world.”<sup>76</sup> Displayed on the land “Israel was visible to the nations.” Indeed, the “life of God’s people is always directed outward to the watching nations.”<sup>77</sup>

However, we note an interesting phenomenon in the remainder of Old Testament history in the way Israel’s story is told. Even though God’s mission to the nations is “the meaning of Israel’s history” yet “during the whole history of Israel this comes to realization little if at all.”<sup>78</sup> I will not stop to probe this in detail but for the purpose of this essay the following two observations are important.

The focus of the Old Testament historical narratives is on the work of God in the midst of Israel to form them as a holy nation. There are two sides to this story. The first side is God’s work in their midst according to the covenant in grace and judgment. The history of Israel is prophetic as it is narrated from the standpoint of God’s covenant word in Deuteronomy. Israel’s faithfulness brings blessing, prosperity, and life. Israel’s unfaithfulness brings curse, destruction, and death. The second side is Israel’s struggle with the idolatry of the nations that surround them. Israel’s mission is to be a holy nation in the midst of the nations. The pagan idolatry of the nations pose a constant threat and temptation to Israel. And, sadly, over and over again the light of Israel’s life and worship is overcome by the darkness of this idolatry.

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Kedoshim, “Just as the navel lies at the center of Man’s body, thus the Land of Israel is the navel of the world”: This centrality should be interpreted missionally. God puts Israel in the ‘centre of the world’ so that they might be seen by the nations.

<sup>75</sup>C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 467; DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, 43-44.

<sup>76</sup>J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, (trans. David Hugh Freeman; Phillipsburgh, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 14.

<sup>77</sup>C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 371.

<sup>78</sup>Blauw, *Missionary Nature of the Church*, 27. Cf. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 30.

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Israel's struggle with idolatry is an important thread in the story but this too must be understood in a missional context. Mission is God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations. However, those nations are not neutral and passive observers so to speak. In their social and cultural lives they do not serve the LORD but idols. Thus Israel's calling was one of a "missionary encounter"<sup>79</sup> with the idolatrous cultures of the surrounding nations, a confrontation with idolatry with the claims of the living God. Israel's life was to be an alternative shaped by God's *torah* and as such was to be a light in the midst of pagan darkness. Sadly, Israel's history demonstrated that instead of being a solution to idolatry they often became submerged in it becoming part of the problem.

So even though the narrative of the historical books zooms in on God's work in the midst of Israel and Israel's struggle with idolatry amidst the nations, we must not forget the bigger picture in which this drama is set: God's mission in and through Israel. Israel's history is something like narrowing in and focussing attention on certain details of a painting without forgetting the bigger picture. That bigger picture is God's work in Israel for the sake of the nations. Put another way: God has a universal goal (all nations, whole creation) but uses particular means (Israel). Much of the focus of the historical books is on the particular means. However, the universal goal remains the ultimate horizon and backdrop of God's mission and Israel's history in the historical books.

A second observation is important: it is primarily in the psalms and the prophetic books that the universal horizon of Israel's election is unmistakably expressed. We find in Israel's poets and prophets the central theme of God's mission to the nations through Israel explicitly and clearly articulated. While Genesis 12:2-3 and Exodus 19:3-6 offer a hermeneutical lens on the meaning of Israel's history at the outset of the story, the

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<sup>79</sup> This is the language of Lesslie Newbigin, e.g., *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1.

psalms and prophets offer another yet consistent interpretive lens on that same history in the midst of the story.

Israel's mission as a light to the nations emerges in the prophets. As Israel responds to God's call in unfaithfulness, the prophets call Israel back to their task. If they will fulfill their calling the nations will be blessed. For example, Jeremiah says to Israel in the midst of their capitulation to pagan idolatry:

“If you, Israel, will return,  
then return to me,”

declares the LORD.

“If you put your detestable idols out of my sight  
and no longer go astray,  
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way  
you swear ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’  
then the nations will invoke blessings by him  
And in him they will boast (Jer. 4:1-2).

However, as Israel continues down the path of covenant unfaithfulness, increasingly submerged in pagan idolatry, the prophets turn their eye to the future. God would judge them and scatter them among the nations. But that would not be the end: God would act in a Messiah and by the Spirit to restore Israel, and then the nations would be gathered into God's kingdom. The goal of God's redemptive work is that the nations will become part of the covenant and enjoy all the privileges of Israel including the coming eschatological salvation.<sup>80</sup> Both the present summons and the future promises of the prophets interpret Israel's identity and role in terms of their mission to the nations.

Likewise the poets and song-writers within Israel compose hymns to remind Israel of their calling. Israel's role and calling in the midst of the nations was constantly nourished by their liturgy. W. Creighton Marlowe calls the psalms the “music of

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<sup>80</sup> Wright summarizes this future vision in terms of the nations being registered in God's city, blessed with God's salvation, accepted in God's house, called by God's name, and joined with God's people (*Mission of God*, 489-500).

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missions.”<sup>81</sup> Mark Boda speaks of the psalter as a “missional collection.”<sup>82</sup> George Peters says that “the Psalter is one of the greatest missionary books in the world, though seldom seen from that point of view” and counts over 175 universal references to the nations of the world.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the most clear reference is Psalm 67:

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine on us—  
so that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.  
May all the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you.  
(Psalm 67:1-2 TNIV).

Craig Broyles rightly comments on the missional significance of Psalm 67:

Psalm 67 shows us that election does not mean that God has his favorites but simply that he has a chosen channel of blessing for all. Election has to do not with God’s goal for humanity, that his blessing is restricted to some and denied to others. It has to do with his means of extending that blessing to all.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> W. Creighton Marlowe, “Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms,” *Missiology* 26 (1998): 445-456.

<sup>82</sup> Mark Boda, “‘Declare His Glory Among the Nations’: The Psalter as Missional Collection”, Bingham Colloquium 2006.

<sup>83</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 116. See also Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 29-38; C. Wright, *Mission of God*, pp. 474-484; Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality*, 15-18.

<sup>84</sup> Craig Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MASS: Hendrikson), 280.

Yet Psalm 67 is far from an isolated reference. The psalms are rife with Israel's orientation to the nations: there are exhortations to Israel to sing of God's mighty deeds among the nations (Ps. 9:11; 18:49; 96:2-3; 105:1); the psalmists lead Israel in responding to the exhortations with a personal commitment to sing among the nations (Ps. 18:49; 57:9; 108:3); there are numerous summons to the nations to praise God (Ps. 47:1; 66:8; 67:3; 96:7, 10; 100:1; 117:1); there are promises of a future in which the nations will join Israel in praise of the LORD (Ps. 22:27; 66:4; 86:9).

Together the prophets and the psalms interpret Israel's history in terms of their mission to the nations. Chris Wright offers a helpful summary the message of the prophets and psalms with respect to Israel's mission to the nations in terms of four observations: the nations are witnessing observers of what YHWH does in and to Israel; the nations can be beneficiaries of the blessing inherent in Israel's covenant; the nations will come to know and worship Israel's God; the nations will ultimately be included within the identity of Israel as God's people.<sup>85</sup>

### **The Mission of God's People in the Old Testament: Elements of Continuity**

At this point, before proceeding with the conclusion of this story, it would be good for our purpose of sketching a missional hermeneutic to pause and summarise what we have learned about the people of God from our brief narrative. The reason for this, as we shall see, is that there is a fundamental continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. We can note the following:

- Israel was a *chosen* people. Out of all the peoples on the earth God chose Abraham and Israel to be his treasured possession.

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<sup>85</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 467-500.

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- Israel was a *redeemed* people. Israel was liberated from service to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt to serve the living God with the whole of their lives.
- Israel was a *covenant* people. God bound Israel to himself in a covenant relationship in which God promised to be their God and they were pledged to be his people.
- Israel was to be a *holy* people. From the beginning God called his people to walk in his way, a way of justice and righteousness. God gave his people the *torah* to shape their lives according to his creational purposes. Much of Israel's history was bound up with God's work in their midst in their missionary encounter with idolatry.
- Israel was a people that knew God's *presence*. This meant that Israel enjoyed an ongoing relationship with God. It also meant a covenantally faithful response of love, faith, and obedience to their covenant Lord who lived in their midst. Further, Israel was to be a people who responded to God's presence in worship.

What is important for the purposes of this essay is to recognise clearly the missional fabric into which each of these themes is woven in the biblical story. Indeed, to wrench any of them from their missional context would be to misunderstand them. Israel was *chosen* so that they might mediate God's salvific blessing to the nations. They were *redeemed* in order to serve the LORD alone so that their *holiness* might display before the nations what a nation looks like when God dwells in their midst. Indeed, it would be the *presence* of God and the wisdom of the *torah* that would set Israel apart, and make them an attractive model before the watching eyes of the nations (Deut. 4:6-8). The *covenant* God

established with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai both had for their goal the salvation of the nations through his covenant people. Thus, Israel's role and identity was missional from the beginning. That is, their life was directed outward toward the nations.

These marks characterise the New Testament church as well. This must be unfolded in the rest of the story but already at this point we can observe two things in the New Testament. First, by faith in Christ we are incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:8-9; Acts 3:25-26). We become part of the people of God shaped by that covenant (cf. Rom. 11:17-21). Thus, we too are blessed along with Father Abraham but also called like him to be a blessing. Second, the words of Israel's call in Exodus 19 are now applied to the church with their full missional implications:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. . . . Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:9-10, 12 TNIV).

Yet continuity is not the only word; there is discontinuity as well. God's people are transformed by the coming of the kingdom in Jesus and His Spirit. And when we take up this next chapter in the story we see that the missional character of God's people is heightened.

## Jesus, the Kingdom, and Israel's Mission

When Jesus steps onto the public stage of history, he announces that the end-time kingdom has arrived (Mk. 1:15). His announcement is nothing less than this: God is breaking into history and is now acting in the Messiah by the power of the Spirit to restore all of creation and all of human life to again live under the rule of God. God is becoming king again! The last days foreseen by the prophets have arrived.

The kingdom has already arrived in Jesus by the Spirit; but it has not yet fully come. It is in this intervening period between the advent of the kingdom and its final completion that gathering can take place. In the parable of the great banquet (Lk. 14:15-24) the 'delay' between the announcement that the banquet is ready and its full enjoyment is taken up with gathering. Referring to this parable and others, J. H. Bavinck comments that "According to the above parables such work consists particularly in going out into the highways and byways to invite all to the marriage feast of the king. One may say thus that the interim is preoccupied with the command of missions, and it is the command of missions that gives the interim meaning."<sup>86</sup>

The prophets had made clear in a variety of ways and in many places that with the dawning of the kingdom the Gentiles would be gathered in to the people of God (e.g., Is. 2:2-4). And Jesus affirmed this prophetic perspective throughout his ministry: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). Yet, while affirming this ingathering of the nations, he limited his own mission and that of his disciples to the Jews: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 15:24; cf. Matt. 10:5-6). How are we to explain the seeming tension between Jesus' universal scope of all nations and his particular focus on Israel?

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<sup>86</sup> Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 32.

Joachim Jeremias has taken up this problem.<sup>87</sup> His conclusion is that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic vision. Since God had chosen Israel to be a light to the nations, and they had failed, then God's plan for the last days was first, to regather and restore Israel, and then, draw the Gentiles into his covenant family. Jeremias says, "... we have to do with two successive events, first the call to Israel, and subsequently the redemptive incorporation of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God."<sup>88</sup> Jeremias further concludes that there are two prior conditions that must be fulfilled before God's call could go out to the Gentiles: the announcement and invitation of the good news of the kingdom to Israel and his vicarious death on the cross.<sup>89</sup>

The first condition was to prepare Israel to carry out their role to draw the nations. For that to happen two things must take place: 1) Israel must be regathered; 2) Israel must be renewed as they are purified and given the Spirit so that they might live in obedience to God's *torah* and shine as a light to the nations. Ezekiel offers a glimpse of both of these features—gathering and renewal—in God's eschatological future.

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and

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<sup>87</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM Press, 1958).

<sup>88</sup> Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 71.

<sup>89</sup> Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 71-73. Blauw speaks in a similar vein. Two events must happen before the nations are gathered: 1) the salvation of the kingdom must first be offered to Israel and 2) the blood of the true Passover lamb must be shed (*Missionary Nature of the Church*, 71).

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move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezek 36:24-27).

Jesus' task, then, is in keeping with "the historic context of revelation" beginning with the conversion of the Jews.<sup>90</sup> In fulfilment of Ezekiel's imagery of a shepherd gathering his lost sheep, Jesus begins to assemble the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24), forming them into a little flock to whom he will give the kingdom (Lk. 12:32). Against this background, when Jesus appoints his twelve this must be seen as a "*symbolic prophetic action*"<sup>91</sup> picturing the beginning of the restoration of Israel (Mk. 3:13-19). "The very existence of the twelve speaks", N.T. Wright says "of the reconstitution of Israel." Jesus "indicates pretty clearly that he was thinking in terms of the eschatological restoration of Israel."<sup>92</sup>

This renewed Israel begins to take part in Jesus' mission of gathering the lost sheep of Israel (Mk 3:14; Matt 10, esp. v. 6). Jesus applies to them Old Testament images that portray Israel's mission. Especially significant are Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says to the disciples: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16 TNIV). Together the images of light and city refer to "the eschatological Jerusalem, which the prophets foretell will one day be raised above all mountains and illumine the nations with its light (cf. Isa. 2:2-5)."<sup>93</sup> The Torah goes forth from Zion and the disciples mission can only be effective through their good deeds and if they build their lives upon the rock foundation of Jesus' teaching (Matt

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<sup>90</sup>Blauw, *Missionary Nature of the Church*, 68; DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, 146-155.

<sup>91</sup>Gerard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 10. Emphasis his.

<sup>92</sup>N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 300.

<sup>93</sup>Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 65.

7:24-27). In the mission of Jesus Israel is being restored to be a light to the nations.

This gives us the proper perspective on the kingdom mission of Jesus. His gathering and formation of a community, the (re)new(ed) Israel is a sign that the kingdom has arrived. Rudolf Schnackenburg rightly says that “the community which forms around Jesus, the Messiah, is just as much a sign of the present power of the reign of God as are his word and actions, his forgiveness of sins, his exorcisms and his cures.”<sup>94</sup>

Before Gentiles can be gathered in to this community three events must take place: Jesus must pour out his blood for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28)<sup>95</sup>; Jesus must rise from the dead inaugurating the age to come; Jesus must pour out his Spirit to give this newly gathered Israel the life of the kingdom (Lk. 24:49; cf. Ezek. 36:26). These central events constitute the hinge of history.<sup>96</sup> With the death of Christ the old age dominated by sin, death, and Satanic power has been defeated and come to an end. With the resurrection of Christ the age to come promised by the prophets has arrived. The outpouring of the Spirit gives his people a share in this new creation.<sup>97</sup> By these events the community gathered around Jesus is renewed.<sup>98</sup> To

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<sup>94</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom* (trans. John Murray; New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 223.

<sup>95</sup> See Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (trans. from 3<sup>rd</sup> German edition Arnold Ehrhardt; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 123-125, 148-152 for the meaning of *polloi* (many) as a great multitude from the nations.

<sup>96</sup> This image is employed a number of times by Lesslie Newbigin. E.g., *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 50; “Bible Studies on John 17: 1. “The Hinge of History”, *Lutheran Standard: USA* (4 April 1967), 10-11.

<sup>97</sup> An excellent systematic theological treatment of the Spirit is Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964). Berkhof contends that the Spirit cannot be understood biblically unless we proceed from the concept of mission (cf. 30ff.).

<sup>98</sup> This reconstitution of the nucleus of the New Israel in the twelve also assumes God's severe judgment on Jews who refused be gathered. It now becomes this regathered community, and those who are added to it, that become the new body employed by God in his missional purposes.

employ the language of Ezekiel, Israel has been gathered, cleansed and given a new heart and Spirit. They are now ready to continue the gathering process that Jesus had initiated: first, the rest of the Israelite nation and then the Gentiles.

The gospels end with the commissioning of this new Israel to their task of gathering in the nations. Perhaps Matthew 28:18-20 is the best known since it has been at the centre of the Western missionary enterprise since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has been interpreted primarily as a command to go applied to missionaries. Yet it is fundamentally an ecclesiological statement. In it a missional identity is given to this restored community. They are a people who are now sent to all nations to continue the eschatological gathering process in this interim period.

### **The Mission of the Church After Pentecost**

The 'delay' of God's judgment and the final completion of the banquet of the kingdom continue. The already-not yet period of the kingdom remains the era in which we live. As Newbigin has expressed it so strongly:

*The meaning of this "overlap of the ages" in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is — so to say — held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.<sup>99</sup>*

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<sup>99</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, American edition (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 153.

This newly gathered Israel remains in Jerusalem, a Jewish community who begins the gathering of Jews into the newly constituted Israel. Acts 2:42-47 gives us a picture of this community in mission after Pentecost. They are a people committed to four things that will enable them to more and more take hold of the life of the kingdom: apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). As such they are an attractive community, a light shining in the midst of Jerusalem (Acts 2:43-47). Their lives of compassion, justice, joy, worship, and power emits a radiant light and "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

However, it would take persecution to send this community beyond Jerusalem. Perhaps they still thought in terms of the prophets' words that the nations would stream to Jerusalem. In any case, persecution drives them far afield yet still spreading the gospel among the Jews (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19). In Antioch a new thing begins to take place, and a new kind of community is formed. The good news is preached to the Greeks, and a community is formed made up of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21). While the description of this church mirrors Jerusalem, a new thing takes place. The Spirit moves that church to set aside Barnabas and Saul to travel throughout the Roman empire planting new communities that embody the light of the gospel in the midst of the nations (Acts 13:1-3). This disturbs the eschatological expectations of the Jewish church in Jerusalem but the concern is settled at a council in Jerusalem when the words of the prophets concerning the gathering of Gentiles is invoked (Acts 15:12-19). The planting of new communities, and the gathering of Jews first and then Gentiles into these communities continues throughout the rest of the story Luke tells in Acts. It ends on a rather abrupt note. The inconclusive ending is a literary strategy of Luke to invite the reader into the story<sup>100</sup>—to repent and believe in Jesus, and to become part of

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<sup>100</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 24; Luke Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 476.

this growing worldwide community called to embody and announce the good news of the kingdom.

### **The Church in the New Testament: Elements of Discontinuity with Israel**

This brief narrative enables us to approach the question: “What is new about the mission of the New Testament church?” What is new is *eschatological*. In Jesus and the Spirit, the end-time kingdom, the last days, the age to come, the new creation, the resurrection life has arrived. This means, first of all, that each of the characteristics of Old Testament Israel has been transformed. The church is an elect people but they are chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4). The church is a redeemed people but redeemed not by the mighty act of the Exodus but the much mightier act of the cross (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The church is an obedient people but now the Spirit enables them to live in obedience to the *torah* (Rom. 8:3-4). The church is a covenant people but are bound to God in the new covenant in Christ’s blood (Lk. 22:20). The church is a people in whom God dwells now with the intimate presence of Christ’s Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). Each of these is fulfilled yet the missional implications of each remains.

The new eschatological era has at least three further significant implications for the people of God. First, God’s people now experience the end-time salvation of the kingdom. Since the Spirit has been given, the people of God have been given a foretaste of the renewal of human life and creation that is coming at the end of history. As such they are previews of that future salvation.

The second eschatological implication is concerned with our place in the story. This time is a time of the gathering of Israel and then the nations on to the ends of the earth. The gathering of a community to share in the salvation of the kingdom is an eschatological event: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). The already-not yet era of

the kingdom is a time characterized by mission, specifically the gathering of all nations into the kingdom community. As Oscar Cullman puts it: “The missionary proclamation of the Church, its preaching of the gospel, gives to the period between Christ’s resurrection and the Parousia its meaning for redemptive history.”<sup>101</sup> On the one hand, the centripetal movement that characterised Israel remains. The church is to be an attractive community that embodies the end-time salvation. Yet there is a new centrifugal element. The people of God are now sent to live among the nations.

And so, closely connected to this, the *form* of the new covenant people of God is new. God’s people are now a non-geographical and non-ethnic community that lives in the midst of all nations. God’s people now live as a light in the midst of all the peoples of the earth. This creates a much more difficult prospect for the mission of God’s people than in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel lived as a nation with their own story, their own culture, their own social institutions, all shaped by God’s word. The nations around them posed an external threat that was, sadly, too often taken into the bosom of their culture. However, the church must live as members and participants of the cultures that are formed by a different story. A missionary encounter in which God’s people live in alternative way or counter to the idolatrous ways of their culture is a much more difficult and complex prospect. The church now lives in a constant tension as it embodies the life of the kingdom in the midst of nations where idolatry reigns.

Each of these characteristics intensifies the missional nature of the people of God. The end has been revealed and accomplished by Jesus, and thus the church in the power of the Spirit is empowered to make it known in ways Old Testament Israel could not. The already-not yet era of the kingdom is

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<sup>101</sup> Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time* (trans. V. V. Filson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 157. I would rather speak of mission as the meaning of redemptive history. Mission is much broader than the preaching of the gospel. It means living the gospel, speaking the gospel, and doing the gospel.

distinguished precisely by the gathering of all peoples to the kingdom banquet. The non-geographical and non-ethnic form of God's people renders them suitable precisely for this task as they live in diaspora in the midst of the nations. The church is missional by its very nature; its identity and role in God's mission is to make known God's salvation.

The Bible tells one story, and a central hermeneutical key to unlocking that story is God's mission in and through the people of God. Thus, if we are to rightly read any part of that story we must see it through the hermeneutical lens of mission.

### **Scripture as a Tool of God's Mission**

The Scriptures do not only record God's mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they are also a tool to effectively bring it about. They don't only tell us the story of God's mission but take an active part in accomplishing his mission. Much of what I have in mind here has been lucidly expressed by N. T. Wright in his book *The Last Word*.<sup>102</sup>

God's ultimate purpose is to renew the creation, and this story is told in the Bible. The authority of Scripture must be understood in terms of its place and role in this story. Or put another way, biblical authority is a "sub-branch ... of the mission of the church."<sup>103</sup> A primary question that must be asked about Scripture and its authority is "What *role* does scripture play *within* God's accomplishment of this goal?"<sup>104</sup> The Bible does not simply give us true information about or provide a reliable commentary on the work of God but takes an active part to actualise and bring about that ongoing purpose of God.

In post-Enlightenment biblical interpretation the authority of God's revelation is often seen in terms of "conveying information" or "divine self-communication" or as a "record of

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<sup>102</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

revelation” or even as a “devotional manual.”<sup>105</sup> Objectively its authority is construed in terms of God conveying true religious, theological, or ethical information; subjectively it is a devotional aid to daily communion with God. Wright doesn’t suggest that these uses of Scripture are entirely wrong-headed but they are subordinate at best. Rather God’s “self-revelation is always to be understood within the category of God’s mission to the world, God’s saving sovereignty let loose through Jesus and the Spirit and aimed at the healing and renewal of the creation.”<sup>106</sup> To understand the authority of Scripture, then, is to understand its formative role, how it powerfully works to shape a missional people. To miss this role and purpose of Scripture is to misunderstand it.

Out of the history of redemption described in the Bible various kinds of books arose as products of God’s mission and played a role in forming God’s people for their mission in the world. As Wright puts it, speaking only about the New Testament: “The apostolic writings . . . were not simply *about* the coming of God’s Kingdom into all the world; they were, and were designed to be, part of the *means whereby that happened* . . .”<sup>107</sup> The Scriptures are not only a *record* of God’s mission in and through Israel; they are also a *tool* God uses to accomplish his mission. Both are essential to a missional hermeneutic.

To explicate what it means for the Scriptures to be a tool of God’s missional purposes we must be sensitive to the storyline of the Bible. Specifically we must take account of the difference between the Old and New Testament Scriptures and the impact of the coming of Jesus Christ. The basic argument of N. T. Wright offers a helpful structure to do just this.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 30-32.

<sup>106</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 31-32.

<sup>107</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 51.

<sup>108</sup> The structure and much of the content of this second section of the paper is indebted to N. T. Wright’s *The Last Word*, 35-59 (chapters 2-4).

## Old Testament Scriptures: Tool of God's Missional Purposes

The Old Testament Scriptures were written to 'equip' God's people for their missional calling to be a distinctive people. Specifically the Scriptures are an instrument of God's loving and powerful presence among his people to shape them for their missional calling. N. T. Wright suggests that "a full account of the role of scripture within the life of Israel would appear as a function of Israel's election by God for the sake of the world. Through scripture, God was equipping his people to serve his purposes." Equipping, Wright continues, is "inadequate shorthand for the multiple tasks scripture accomplished."<sup>109</sup>

It is precisely in order that Israel might fulfill her missional calling and be a light to the nations, that the law ordered its national, liturgical, and moral life; that wisdom helped to shape daily conduct in conformity to God's creational order; that the prophets threatened and warned Israel in their disobedience and promised blessing in obedience; that the psalms brought all of Israel's life into God's presence in worship and prayer; that the historical books continued to tell the story of Israel at different points reminding Israel of and calling them to their missional place in the story.

In a similar vein Chris Wright points out that the Old Testament is a missional phenomenon that reflects the struggles of a people called to be a light to the world in their missionary encounter and engagement with competing cultural and religious claims of the surrounding world. Specifically, the story of the exodus in the Torah narrates how the LORD confronts the rival religious claims of the Pharaoh and Egypt; the story of creation is presented as a polemic against the creation myths of the Ancient Near East; the historical narratives and pre-exilic prophets depict Israel's struggle with the religious culture of Canaan; the exilic and post-exilic books emerge as Israel's

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<sup>109</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 37.

struggles with their identity in the midst of large empires with competing religious commitments; wisdom texts engage pagan wisdom traditions “with a staunch monotheistic disinfectant”<sup>110</sup>; the psalms and prophets nourish the calling of Israel to be a priestly kingdom in the midst of the nations.<sup>111</sup>

In short, the Old Testament canon was shaped by a people called to be a community of mission, a light to the nations. The various books arose to nurture that calling in various ways.

### **New Testament Scriptures: Tool of God’s Missional Purposes**

The New Testament Scriptures also emerge in the context of the mission of God’s people. The New Testament tells the story of God’s mission through Israel as it climaxes in Jesus, and brings that story to bear in various ways on the early church to form and equip them for their missional calling in the world.

### **JESUS FULFILLS THE PURPOSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES**

Jesus accomplishes what the Old Testament Scriptures had been trying to do — bring salvation to God’s people and through them to the world. As we have noted, the Old Testament arose as a tool of God’s presence among his people to shape them into a faithful people prepared to carry out their missional calling. Israel failed because of the sin deeply rooted in their hearts. Jesus accomplishes what the Torah, and indeed the rest of the Old Testament, could not. As the apostle Paul puts it:

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful

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<sup>110</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 50.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-51.

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humanity to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in human flesh, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

What Paul says about the law could be said about the rest of the Old Testament; one could fill in ‘prophecy’ or ‘wisdom’ or ‘psalms’ or ‘history’ where Paul writes ‘law.’ The Old Testament Scriptures could not form a missionary people because they were weakened by the sinful nature. Wright says that the “work which God had done through scripture in the Old Testament is done by Jesus in his public career, his death and resurrection, and his sending of the Spirit. ... Jesus thus does, climactically and decisively, what scripture had in a sense been trying to do: *bring God’s fresh Kingdom order to God’s people and thence to the world.*”<sup>112</sup>

### THE APOSTOLIC GOSPEL OF JESUS: THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GOD

The apostles proclaim the good news that Israel’s story has been fulfilled in Jesus, that he has accomplished what the Old Testament had not. It is now this preaching of what Jesus has achieved that now shapes God’s people for their mission in the world. The New Testament refers to this proclamation as the apostles’ teaching, as the gospel, and as the word of God. N. T. Wright summarizes what the word of God was for the apostles: “It was the story of Jesus (particularly his death and resurrection), told as the climax of the story of God and Israel and thus offering itself as both the true story of the world and the foundation and energizing force for the church’s mission.”<sup>113</sup>

The proclamation of God’s powerful word calls into existence a missional community. Peter’s sermon leads to the formation of

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<sup>112</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 43. Emphasis mine.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2), and the ongoing announcement of this gospel continues to testify to Jesus with great power (e.g., Acts 4:33; 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).<sup>114</sup> Paul reflects on his own proclamation of the gospel, and sees God's power to transform people (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 2:4-5).

But this word not only forms a community, it also is brought to bear on their lives in various ways to shape them into an attractive hermeneutic of the gospel. The work of Herman Ridderbos on the authority of the New Testament is helpful here. He defines scriptural authority in terms of the redemptive-historical categories of *kerygma*, *marturia*, and *didache*.<sup>115</sup> *Kerygma* is the work of a herald in proclaiming the good news of the person and events of Jesus Christ as the climax of the Old Testament story. *Marturia* is the witness of the apostles to what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ to shape a kingdom people for the sake of the world. *Kerygma* and *marturia* pertain mainly to the so-called historical books of the New Testament: they are a proclamation and witness to the historical events of Jesus Christ. *Didache* on the other hand represents a more "advanced stage of revelation" that flows from and builds on the proclamation of and witness to Jesus Christ. Here we are dealing with the epistles of the New Testament. They build up the church by unfolding the significance of gospel of Jesus Christ for the church's missionary calling in its particular context. Ridderbos comments that this ...

... is entirely in accord with the apostles' significance and task in the history of redemption. As witnesses of Christ, it was not only their task to

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<sup>114</sup> See Brian S. Rosner, *The Progress of the Word*, in ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 215-233.

<sup>115</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Formerly *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*; Translated by H. De Jongste; Revised by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 49-76.

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lay and to be the foundation of the church; but because of their missionary calling, they also had the ongoing duty in the church of protecting and nurturing the sheep and lambs of Christ (John 21:15ff.), of building up His body and bringing it to maturity so that it might no longer be immature, tossed up and down, here and there, under the influence of every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:11ff.).<sup>116</sup>

The terminology of *didache* arises from the sphere of religious instruction, and more specifically Jewish forms of instruction, that took place in the synagogue or between a rabbi and his disciples. It is instruction that further explains and unfolds the significance of God's mighty acts in history for the missional community. While *kerygma* and *maturia* make known the mighty act of God in Jesus Christ, *didache* works out the missional implications for specific communities.

So we can summarize in this way: As it is proclaimed and taught, the apostolic gospel as God's powerful word calls into existence a missional community, shapes that community to be a faithful people, and worked through them to draw others to faith.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON: LITERARY EXPRESSION OF APOSTOLIC GOSPEL

The verbal proclamation, witness, and teaching of the apostles take literary form in the canon of the New Testament. As such this word of God written continues to form, equip, and renew the church for their mission in the world in the way that the living word of the apostles had done. The New Testament authors, conscious of their authority and inspired by the Spirit, wrote books that would shape the church for its mission. The message

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<sup>116</sup> Ridderbos, *Authority of New Testament Scripture*, 69.

of these books called the church into existence, sustained them as God's faithful people, and equipped them for their missional calling. The New Testament authors believed themselves to be authorized teachers, who, by the guidance and power of the Spirit, wrote books and letters to sustain, energize, shape, judge, and renew the church.<sup>117</sup> As such these books "carried the same power, the same *authority in action*, that had characterized the initial preaching of the word."<sup>118</sup>

An obvious example is Paul's letters.<sup>119</sup> Paul was a missionary who established witnessing communities in places where there were none. He maintains that it "has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Rom. 15:20). But as a church planter he was concerned that those congregations bear faithful witness to the gospel in their lives, deeds, and words in their particular setting. Perhaps we can think imaginatively of Paul as he left his newly formed congregations as practicing something similar to what an Indian missionary bishop used to do. He would take them into the town square, ask them to put their hands on their heads, and say: "Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel of Christ." He would then pronounce a benediction on them and say: "Now you are the mission in this place." In any case, this was certainly Paul's concern. In his return visits *and in his letters* he seeks to accomplish that end. Thus Paul's letters emerge from the heart of a church planter concerned that his newly formed congregations embody the gospel and live as a light in the midst of the pagan Roman empire. To properly read Paul, this missional intent and purpose must be recognised.

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<sup>117</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 51.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Barram, *The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic*, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 61 (2007): 42-58. cf. also Barram's *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

## Conclusion

Both in the case of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the books arose as products of the ongoing mission of God in and through his people. The various genres of literature represent different tools that God used in his presence among his people to form them into a faithful missionary people. This represents the heartbeat of biblical canon. If one is to read and properly interpret these books one must resonate with the missional concern that they carry.

This is a provisional attempt to establish the missional frame with which I believe we must approach, read, and listen to Scripture in a faithful way. No doubt this needs much critique and refinement. But what I am convinced of is that today's church will read the Bible aright only as it reads along its missional grain. That will mean reading the story that gives structure to the canon as a story of God's mission in and through his people for the sake of the whole creation. It will also mean recognising the way the various books of the canon attempted to shape a missional people.

If it is true what I quoted Nicholas Lash as saying at the beginning of this essay, that "if the questions to which ancient authors sought to respond in terms available to them within their cultural horizons are to be 'heard' today with something like their original force and urgency, they have first to be 'heard' as questions that challenge us with comparable seriousness," then we must be engaged in and conscious of the same mission as the biblical authors. If the questions to which the ancient authors sought to respond were missional, then missional questions must challenge us with comparable seriousness. Thus a faithful hermeneutic in reading Scripture can only happen when we are engaged in God's mission because that is what engaged the original authors. It is only when our missional anticipatory structures are open that we will engage the text in an authentic way. As readers of Scripture trace the unfolding story of God's mission, find their role and identity in participating in that story,

and interpret the text through a missional lens, it will engage the deepest concerns and aims of the original text. Then we will hear the deep resonances, authentic parallels, and legitimate implications with our missional calling today — God speaking to us in the Scriptures.