

Christian Mission and the Old Testament: Matrix or Mismatch?

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Introduction

Many people, in my frequent experience, are still surprised to hear a sermon on mission based on a text from the Old Testament, let alone an academic lecture purporting to offer missiological reflections on the Old Testament. 'Mission' is widely viewed as a task of the Christian church, originating from some words of Jesus on the Mount of Ascension. It seems to involve sending off somewhat peculiar but doubtless very worthy people to far-off parts of the earth to work for God in a bewildering variety of ways, returning from time to time to tell us about their adventures and ask for continued support for their endeavours. Nothing of that sort seems to have happened in the Old Testament (not even Jonah came home on furlough to raise funds for a return trip to Nineveh), so mission is deemed 'missing- presumed unborn' in that era.

A more sophisticated form of such a caricature is to be found in the way David Bosch relegates the Old Testament's contribution on mission to a sub-section of a chapter entitled 'Reflections on the New Testament as a Missionary Document', in his magisterial survey, *Transforming Mission*.^[1] The OT certainly provides essential theological preparation for the emerging mission of the NT church, but Bosch defines mission in terms of crossing barriers for the sake of the Gospel (barriers of geography, culture, language, religion, etc.). Since Israel received no mandate to *go to* the nations in that sense, there is no mission in the OT. Apart from observing that in fact there are many 'barrier-crossing' episodes in the grand OT story of Israel's journey with Yahweh, I would argue that he has defined mission too narrowly. A more fully biblical understanding needs to show how the missionary mandate of the NT had its roots in the OT scriptures. This task requires careful attention to the rich texture of OT themes and texts that shaped, justified and motivated that NT mission through Israel's self-understanding of their own mission as the elect people of God in the midst of the nations. What follows is a brief survey of some of the themes that might be included in such a task.

2. The uniqueness and universality of Yahweh

According to the OT texts, the faith of Israel made remarkable affirmations about Yahweh, affirmations which had a polemical edge in their own context and still stand as distinctive claims. Among them are the declaration that Yahweh alone is God and there is no other (e.g. Deut. 4:35, 39) and that Yahweh is God over the whole earth and all nations (e.g. Pss. 24, 96, 1 Chron. 29:11 etc.). The impact of such absolute claims is felt in such widely varying contexts as the struggle against idolatry, the language of worship, and the response to other nations, both in their own contemporary international history, and in eschatological vision.

There is no doubt that the strength of the OT affirmations about the uniqueness and universality of Yahweh as God underlie, and indeed provide some of the vocabulary for, the NT affirmations about the uniqueness and universality of Jesus (cf. Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Cor. 8:5-6). It is also note-worthy that these early Christian affirmations were equally polemical in their own historical context as those of ancient Israel and in turn provided the primary rationale and motivation for Christian mission. We are dealing here with the missiological implications of biblical monotheism.

A fully biblical understanding of the universality and uniqueness of Yahweh and of Jesus Christ stands in the frontline of a missiological response to the relativism at the heart of religious pluralism and some forms of postmodernist philosophy.

3. The purpose of Yahweh: blessing the nations

Setting aside for a moment the question of the chronological history of the OT texts and adopting a canonical reading, we find that the OT begins on the stage of universal history. After the accounts of creation (which also have missiological relevance in relation to human care for the created order), we read the story of God's dealings with fallen humanity and the problem and challenge of the world of the nations (Gen. 1-11). After the stories of the Flood and of the Tower of Babel, could there be a future for the nations in relation to God? Or would judgement have to be God's final word? The story of Abraham, beginning in Genesis 12, gives a clear answer. God's declared commitment is that he intends to bring blessing to the nations: 'all the families of the earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12:3). Repeated six times in Genesis alone, this key affirmation is the foundation of biblical mission, inasmuch as it presents the *mission of God*. The creator God has a purpose, a goal: blessing the nations of humanity. So fundamental is this that

Paul defines the Genesis declaration as 'the gospel in advance' (Gal. 3:8). And the concluding vision of the whole Bible signifies the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, as people from every nation, tribe, language and people are gathered among the redeemed in the new creation (Rev. 7:9). The gospel and mission both begin in Genesis, then, and both are located in the redemptive intention of the Creator to bless the nations. Mission is God's address to the problem of fractured humanity.

4. Yahweh's election of Israel for the purpose of blessing the nations

The same Genesis texts which affirm the universality of God's mission to bless the nations also and with equal strength affirm the particularity of God's election of Abraham and his descendants to be the vehicle of that mission. The election of Israel is assuredly one of the most fundamental pillars of the biblical worldview, and of Israel's historical sense of identity (as N.T. Wright's books on Jesus and the New Testament have shown very clearly). It is vital to insist that although the belief in their election could be (and was) distorted into a narrow doctrine of national superiority, that move was resisted in Israel's own literature (e.g. Deut. 7:7ff.). The affirmation is that the Yahweh, the God who had chosen Israel, was also the creator, owner and Lord of the whole world (Deut. 10:14f), and that Yahweh had chosen Israel in relation to his purpose for the world, not just for Israel. The election of Israel was not tantamount to a rejection of the nations, but explicitly for their ultimate benefit. Thus, rather than asking if Israel itself 'had a mission', in the sense of being 'sent' anywhere, we need to see the missional nature of Israel's *existence* in relation to the mission of God in the world. Israel's mission was to *be* something, not to *go* somewhere. This perspective is clearly focused in the person of the Servant of Yahweh, who both embodies the election of Israel (identical things are said about Israel and the Servant), and also is charged with the mission (like Israel's) of bringing the blessing of Yahweh's justice, salvation and glory to the ends of the earth.

5. The interaction of Israel and the nations, historically, culturally, religiously

It is also well worth examining the attitude of Israel towards those representatives of the nations in their own society - the aliens and sojourners. These *gerim*, apart from their intrinsic interest in the OT period, came to have even more importance as the term was assimilated to the Jewish proselyte movements that had their own influence on early Christian mission.[2] Paul rejoices in the fact that as a result of his mission, those who were formerly 'aliens and strangers' to Israel had now been brought fully into the people of God through the Messiah, Jesus (Eph. C2:11-3:6).

6. The ethical dimension of Israel's 'visibility'

Israel were called to be distinctive from the surrounding world in ways that were not merely religious but also ethical. This is expressed as the very purpose of their election in relation to God's promise to bless the nations in Genesis 18:19. In the context of, and stark contrast to, the world of Sodom and Gomorrah, Yahweh says of Abraham:

I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

Later covenantal obedience is not only based on their historical redemption out of Egypt, but also linked to their identity and role as a priestly and holy people in the midst of the nations in Exodus 19:4-6. As Yahweh's priesthood, Israel would be the means by which he would be known to the nations and the means of bringing them to himself (performing a function analogous to the role of Israel's own priests between God and the rest of the people). As a holy people, they would be ethically (as well as ritually) distinctive from the practices of surrounding nations (Lev. 18-19). Such visibility would be a matter of observation and comment among the nations (Deut. 4:6-8). The question of Israel's ethical obedience or ethical failure was not, then, merely a matter between themselves and Yahweh, but of major significance in relation to Yahweh's agenda for the nations (cf. Jer. 4:1-2).

This missiological perspective on OT ethics seems to me a fruitful approach to the age-old hermeneutical debate over whether and how the moral teaching given to Israel in the OT has any authority or relevance to Christians. If, as I believe, it was given in order to shape Israel to be what they were called to be - a light to the nations, a holy priesthood, then it has a paradigmatic relevance to those who, in Christ, have inherited the same role in relation to the nations.

7. Eschatological vision; ingathering of nations

The historic promise that God would bless the nations through Israel developed into an eschatological vision that is found particularly in Israel's worship (cf. the universal scope of Pss. 47, 87, 96) and in some of the prophets (Amos 9:12, Isa. 19:23-25, 49:6, 56:1-8, 60:1-3, 66:19-21, Zech. 2:1 etc.). These texts are quite breathtaking in their

universal scope. Ultimately there would be those of the nations who would not merely be joined to Israel, but would come to be identified as Israel, with the same names, privileges and responsibilities before God.

This is the dimension of Israel's prophetic heritage that most profoundly influenced the theological explanation and motivation of the gentile mission in the NT. It certainly underlies James's interpretation of the Christ event and the success of the gentile mission in Acts 15 (quoting Amos 9:12). And it likewise inspired Paul's efforts as a practitioner and theologian of mission (e.g. Rom. 15:7-16).

8. Models of 'mission'

As we read the OT from the perspective shaped by considerations such as outlined above, many texts take on a missiological dimension that enable them to provide models for a multi-faceted understanding of mission. These may include:

- *Key events*. The exodus, for example, as the supreme model of Yahweh's redemptive action, not only provided Israel with a basis for future hope, but could be applied to the future blessing of the nations - most ironically including Egypt itself (Isa. 19:19-25). Similar use could be made of the centripetal attraction of Jerusalem (Isa. 56-66), the consecration of the temple, (1 Kgs. 8:41ff), the restoration after judgement (Jer. 12:14-17)
- *Institutions* Certain features of Israel's socio-economic or religious life embodied theological rationales that also lend themselves to missiological reflection: e.g. the jubilee (Lev. 25, Isa. 61), the sacrificial system and temple (Isa. 56:1-8), certain festivals (Zech. 14:16-19).
- *Individuals*. The call narratives of some OT figures have always provided fertile soil for Christian reflection on the challenge of missionary vocation (especially those of Moses and Isaiah). But the OT itself seems to see in certain narratives a clear link to the Abrahamic promise of blessing the nations when individual foreigners are incorporated into Israel, or come to share in its blessings in some way (e.g. Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, the widow of Zarephath).

Conclusion

This has been a short and sketchy survey, but I trust it points to a number of areas where key OT themes and central convictions of Israel's faith and world-view have had a profound effect on the NT and Christian understanding of our mission in the world - or more accurately, our participation in God's mission in God's world. Much more work remains to be done, exegetically and hermeneutically, in this field of enquiry.

NOTES

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1. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, Orbis: 1991). The relevant words are: 'There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh.... Even so, the Old Testament is fundamental to the understanding of mission in the New' (p. 17).
2. Cf. M. Pope, 'Proselyte' in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (New York:Abingdon, 1962) vol. III, pp. 921-931; S. McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991); C. van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); R. De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations*, (Grand Rapids:Baker, 1971).