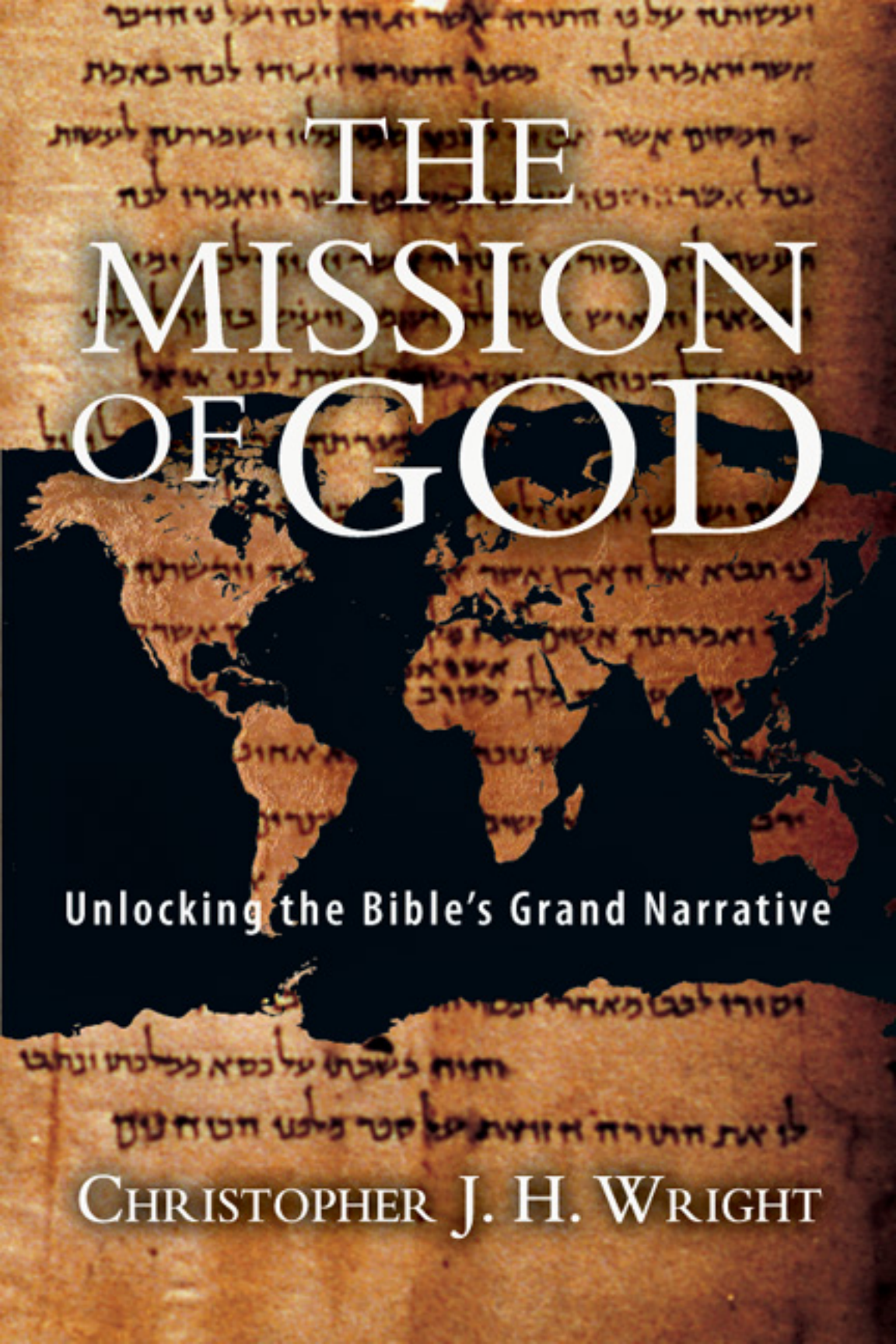
THE MISSION OF GOD
Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative
CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT

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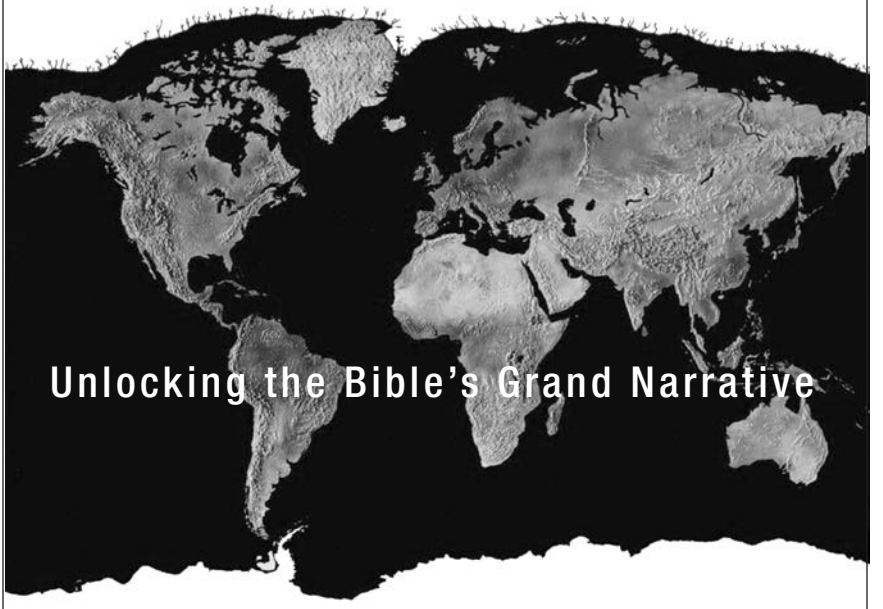

Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative

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FOR TIM AND BIANCA

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Preface

"What are you working on at the moment?" It has been hard to give a straight answer to this common question during the past few years I have been working on this book. "A book on the Bible and mission," has been my usual reply, but I have never been sure which of the two words to put first. Am I seeking to understand Christian mission in the light of the Bible, or to understand the Bible in the light of God's mission? Or, in phrases that are explained in the introduction, is this book a biblical theology of mission, or a missional reading of the Bible? I think the final product is probably a bit of both, but with more emphasis on the second. Many others have produced fine and comprehensive works establishing a biblical foundation for Christian mission. My major concern has been to develop an approach to biblical hermeneutics that sees the mission of God (and the participation in it of God's people) as a framework within which we can read the whole Bible. Mission is, in my view, a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture. To that extent I offer this study not only as a biblical reflection on mission but also, I hope, as an exercise in biblical theology.

Books that offer a biblical theology of mission typically have an Old Testament section and then a (usually much larger) New Testament section. Then, in each section (and especially in the second), they tend to examine different parts of the canon or isolate the mission theology of particular authors, such as each Gospel writer, the apostle Paul and so on.

My approach has been rather different. I have tried to identify some of the underlying themes that are woven all through the Bible's grand narrative—themes that are the foundational pillars of the biblical worldview and therefore also of biblical theology: monotheism, creation, humanity, election, redemption, covenant, ethics, future hope. In each case I have then tried to pay full attention

to their Old Testament roots before moving through to see the New Testament development, fulfillment or extension in each case. Most of the chapters therefore include reflections drawn from both Testaments, sometimes moving backward and forward between them.

Since my own field of special interest has been the Old Testament for more than thirty years, it is inevitable that much more space and much greater depth of discussion has been accorded to Old Testament texts and themes. There was a time I thought the book would be simply an Old Testament theology of mission (and there are few enough good models of that genre). However, I write as a Christian theologian, and while I endeavor to read and listen to the Old Testament with its own integrity and on its own terms, I cannot fail to read it also as a Christian. And, as I understand it, that means that I read it in submission to the One who claimed to be its ultimate focus and fulfillment—Jesus Christ, in the light of the New Testament Scriptures that bear witness to him and in relation to the mission he entrusted to his disciples. If, in the end, however, there is a lot more of the Old Testament than of the New in this book, I suppose I can at least claim that the same is true of the Bible, after all.

Since my main aim has been to argue for a missiological reading of biblical theology, I have not felt it necessary to devote acres of space to footnotes documenting all shades of scholarly exegesis or critical analysis of all the texts I have referred to. For certain key texts that are of pivotal importance in my argument, I have sought to present adequate exegesis and documentation. In many other cases, scholars or students who wish to pursue such issues in commentaries and journals will know where to look.

All authors know the debt they owe to others in the formation of their own thoughts and perspectives. So I offer my hearty thanks to a host of people who have walked this road with me for longer or shorter stretches. These include:

Two decades of students at the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India, and All Nations Christian College, England, who shared my developing efforts to relate Bible and mission through more classes than any of us care to remember, and many of whom are still wrestling with the issues in practical mission service all over the world.

Jonathan Bonk, director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut, and Gerald Anderson before him, who, along with their marvelous staff and community, have given me repeated hospitality at OMSC for research and writing on this project.

John Stott, who has constantly encouraged and prayed for me in this project, and graciously allowed me the frequent benefit of his writing retreat cottage, the Hookses, on the west coast of Wales.

Langham Partnership International Council, for giving me not only a job that keeps me in touch with the realities of world mission but also specified time for study and writing each year.

Eckhard J. Schnabel, M. Daniel Carroll R., Dean Flemming and Dan Reid, who read the original manuscript and made dozens of constructively critical comments that have helped me to clarify and improve what I wanted to say in many places. Thanks also to Chris Jones for helping to prepare the indexes.

My wife and family, who have been as encouraging (and patient) in this as in all previous projects, and are represented in the dedication by the one who, as Israel was for God, is our firstborn son, Tim and his wife Bianca, with the joy and the prayer of 3 John 4.

Christopher J. H. Wright

Introduction

I remember them so vividly from my childhood—the great banner texts around the walls of the missionary conventions in Northern Ireland where I would help my father at the stall of the Unevangelized Fields Mission, of which he was Irish Secretary after twenty years in Brazil. "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," they urged me, along with other similar imperatives in glowing gothic calligraphy. By the age of twelve, I could have quoted you all the key ones—"Go ye therefore and make disciples . . ." "How shall they hear . . . ?" "You shall be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth." "Whom shall we send? . . . Here am I, send me." I knew my missionary Bible verses. I had responded to many a rousing sermon on most of them.

By the age of twenty-one I had a degree in theology from Cambridge, in which the same texts had been curiously lacking. At least, it is curious to me now. At the time there seemed to be little connection at all between theology and mission in the mind of the lecturers, or of myself, or, for all I knew, in the mind of God either. *Theology* was all about God—what God was like, what God had said and done, and what mostly dead people had speculated on all three. *Mission* was about us, the living, and what we have been doing since William Carey (who of course was the first missionary, or so we erroneously thought).

"Mission is what *we* do." That was the assumption, supported of course by clear biblical commands. "Jesus sends me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Many years later, including years when I was teaching theology myself as a missionary in India, I found myself teaching a module called "The Biblical Basis of Mission" at All Nations Christian College—an international mission training and graduate school in southeast England. The module title itself embodies the same assumption. *Mission* is the noun, the given reality. It is something *we* do, and

we basically know what it is; *biblical* is the adjective, which we use to justify what we already know we should be doing. The reason why we know we should be doing mission, the basis, foundation or grounds on which we justify it, must be found in the Bible. As Christians, we need a biblical basis for everything we do. What then is "the biblical basis for mission"? Roll out the texts. Add some that nobody else has thought of. Do some joined up theology. Add some motivational fervor. And the class is heartwarmingly appreciative. Now they have even more biblical support for what they already believed anyway, for these are All Nations students, after all. They only came to the college because they are committed to doing mission.

This mild caricature is not in the least derogatory in intent. I believe passionately that mission is what we should be doing, and I believe the Bible endorses and mandates it. However, the more I taught that course, the more I used to introduce it by telling the students that I would like to rename it: from "The Biblical Basis of Mission" to "The Missional Basis of the Bible." I wanted them to see not just that the Bible contains a number of texts which happen to provide a rationale for missionary endeavor but that *the whole Bible is itself a "missional" phenomenon*. The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God. The 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. The Bible is the drama of this God of purpose engaged in the mission of achieving that purpose universally, embracing past, present and future, Israel and the nations, "life, the universe and everything," and with its center, focus, climax, and completion in Jesus Christ. 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's all about."

Some Definitions

At this point it would be as well to offer some definitions of the way I am planning to use the term *mission*, and the related words: *missionary, missional* and *missiological*.

Mission. It will be immediately clear from my reminiscences above that I am dissatisfied with popular use of the word *mission* (or more commonly in the United States, *missions*) solely in relation to human endeavors of various kinds. I do not at all question the validity of Christian active engagement in mission, but I do want to argue throughout this book for the theological priority of *God's* mission. *Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated)*

means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. That is how I usually answer when I am asked how I would define *mission.* Our mission flows from and participates in the mission of God.

Furthermore, I am dissatisfied with accounts of mission that stress only the "roots" of the word in the Latin verb *mitto*, "to send," and which then see its primary significance in the dynamic of sending or being sent. Again, this is not because I doubt the importance of this theme within the Bible, but because it seems to me that if we define *mission* only in "sending" terms we necessarily exclude from our inventory of relevant resources many other aspects of biblical teaching that directly or indirectly affect our understanding of God's mission and the practice of our own.

Generally speaking, I will use the term *mission* in its more general sense of a long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieved through proximate objectives and planned actions. Within such a broad mission (as applied to any group or enterprise), there is room for subordinate missions, in the sense of specific tasks assigned to a person or group that are to be accomplished as steps toward the wider mission. In the secular world "mission statements" seem to be much in vogue. Even restaurants (whose purpose in life one would have thought rather obvious), sometimes display them on their front windows, in an effort to link the task of feeding customers to some wider sense of mission. Companies, schools, charities—even some churches (whose purpose in life ought to be more obvious than it is, even to their own members)—feel it helps them to have a mission statement, which summarizes the purpose for which they exist and what they hope to accomplish. The Bible presents to us a portrait of God that is unquestionably purposeful. The God who walks the paths of history through the pages of the Bible pins a mission statement to every signpost on the way. It could be said that the mission of this book is to explore that divine mission and all that lies behind it and flows from it in relation to God himself, God's people and God's world, insofar as it is revealed to us in God's Word.

Missionary. The word is usually a noun, referring to people who engage in mission, usually in a culture other than their own. It has even more of a flavor of "being sent" than the word *mission* itself. Thus missionaries are typically those who are sent by churches or agencies to work in mission or on missions. The word is also used as an adjective, as in "the missionary mandate" or "a person of missionary zeal." Unfortunately, the word has also generated something of a caricature, the missionary stereotype, as a regrettable side effect of

the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission effort of the Western churches. The term *missionary* still evokes images of white, Western expatriates among "natives" in far off countries—and it still does so all the more regrettably in churches that ought to know better, and certainly ought to know that already the majority of those engaged in crosscultural mission are not Western at all but from the growing indigenous churches of the majority world. As a result, many mission agencies that now build networks and partnerships with majority world churches and agencies prefer to avoid the term *missionary* because of these unreconstructed mental images, and describe their personnel as "mission partners" instead.

Because of the dominant association of the word *missionary* with the activity of sending and with crosscultural communication of the gospel—that is, with a broadly centrifugal dynamic of mission—I prefer not to use the term in connection with the Old Testament. In my view (which is not agreed on by all), Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations. So while it will be abundantly clear that I certainly do read the Old Testament missiologically, I would not choose to speak of "the missionary message of the Old Testament" (the title of an early and excellent book by H. H. Rowley in 1944).[1] There are many biblical resources (in the Old as well as the New Testament) that are profoundly enriching in our understanding of mission in its broadest sense (and especially the mission of God) that are not about sending missionaries. It is probably inappropriate therefore to refer to those texts and themes as "missionary."[2] Unfortunately, until recently *missionary* seemed to be the only available English adjective formed from *mission*. Another form, however, is being rightly welcomed into wider use.

Missional. Missional is simply an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission. Missional is to the word *mission* what covenantal is to *covenant,* or fictional to *fiction*. Thus we might speak of a missional reading of the exodus, meaning a reading that explores its dynamic significance in God's mission for Israel and the world and its relevance to Christian mission today. Or we might say that Israel had a missional role in the midst of the nations—implying that they had an identity and role connected to God's ultimate inten-

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[1]H. H. Rowley, *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (London: Carey Press, 1944).

[2]Interestingly, though, the term *missio Dei* (mission of God) in its earliest use referred to the inner sending of God—that is the Father's sending of the Son into the world, and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. It is in this sense (among others) that John Stott can speak of our "missionary God"; see, "Our God Is a Missionary God" in John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 321-36.

tion of blessing the nations. Thus I would argue that Israel had a missional reason for existence, without implying that they had had a *missionary* mandate to go to the nations (whereas we could certainly speak of the missionary role of the *church* among the nations).

Missiology and *missiological.* Missiology is the study of mission. It includes biblical, theological, historical, contemporary and practical reflection and research. Accordingly, I will normally use *missiological* when such a theological or reflective aspect is intended. In the two examples above, one might equally speak of a missiological reading of exodus, but it would be less appropriate to speak of Israel having a missiological role in the midst of the nations. In fact, in this latter case it is because neither "missionary role" nor "missiological role" seems quite right that the word *missional* is increasingly helpful.

The Journey Ahead

A word is also in order at this point regarding the structure of the book. Returning to my personal reminiscence: for years I continued to teach "The Biblical Basis of Mission." At one point I introduced an opening lecture raising the specific issue mentioned in my passing comments at the start of the course—the missional basis of the Bible itself. This arose partly from the ambient theological culture at All Nations Christian College, which was intentionally to approach every subject in the curriculum from a missiological angle. It happened that I also taught the module on the doctrine of Scripture and biblical hermeneutics, so it was natural to ask how a missiological perspective affected one's understanding of what Scripture is in itself, how it came to be as we now have it, and the hermeneutical assumptions and principles with which we approach it as readers. My thinking tended to oscillate between both courses in a cross-fertilizing way. Biblical mission and biblical hermeneutics seemed to morph into each other in unexpected but fascinating ways.

But the need to look more carefully at a missiological hermeneutic of the Bible also arose from the specific challenge of a colleague in another institution. In 1998 I was invited to give the Laing Lecture at London Bible College (now called the London School of Theology [LST]). I offered the title " 'Then they will know that I am the Lord': Missiological Reflections on the Ministry and Message of Ezekiel." At the time I was working on my exposition of Ezekiel in the Bible Speaks Today series, and this was a useful opportunity to expose these reflections to friendly criticism. And that is what they got.

In his response, Anthony Billington (lecturer in Hermeneutics at LST), while warmly appreciating the lecture's content, raised questions over the va-

lidity of using missiology as a framework for interpreting Ezekiel (or any other biblical text). There are of course many frameworks within which people read the text (feminist, psychological, dispensational, etc.). This is not intrinsically wrong since we all have to start somewhere. But, Billington said, the question is

> Does this or that particular framework *do justice* to the thrust of the text in its biblical-theological context? Or does it *distort* the text? In other words, it's not that the bringing of a framework to a text is necessarily wrong in and of itself, nor even that the text may not be illuminated in significant ways when we do—for it frequently is. The question is more what sort of *control* the framework exercises over the text, and whether the text is ever allowed to *critique* the framework at any point.[3]

The entirely appropriate challenge of Billington's words led me to reflect further on what a missiological hermeneutic of Scripture actually means and whether or not it is a framework that does justice to the text or seriously distorts it. This is the concern that I seek to address in part one, "The Bible and Mission." It is my objective in this book not only to demonstrate (as many others have done) that Christian mission is fully grounded in the Scripture (though I deliberately pay more attention to its Old Testament roots than most books on the subject do), but also to demonstrate that a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible.

So in chapter one I survey some steps that have already been taken toward a missiological hermeneutic, but argue that a more thorough effort is needed to go beyond them. Chapter two is a sketch of some contours of what I think a missiological hermeneutic of the Bible entails. If all hermeneutical frameworks are like maps of the territory of Scripture, then the only test of a map is how faithfully it interprets the territory for the traveler in terms of what he or she wants or needs to know to make sense of the journey. The rest of the book tests whether the map provided by approaching the whole Bible from the perspective of the mission of God fulfills the subtitle of the book, enabling us to grasp the driving dynamic of the Bible's grand narrative.

The remaining three parts of the book take up in turn three major focal points of the worldview of Israel in the Old Testament, which are also foundational to a Christian worldview when understood in relation to Christ:

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[3]From Anthony Billington's unpublished written response to my Laing Lecture at London Bible College, October 1998.

- The God of Mission (part 2)
- The People of Mission (part 3)
- The Arena of Mission (part 4)

In part two I examine the missiological implications of biblical monotheism. The identity, uniqueness and universality of YHWH, the God of Israel (chap. 3), and the directly related claims that the New Testament makes for Jesus (chap. 4) have enormous implications for mission. Indeed, Christian mission would have no foundation at all apart from these biblical affirmations about the one and only living God who wills to be known to the world through Israel and through Christ. But we cannot do full justice to biblical monotheism without seeing it in conflict with the gods and idols of human construction that consume so much biblical rhetoric and ink. The conflict with idolatry is a somewhat neglected biblical theme that we subject to some analysis and missiological reflection in chapter five.

In part three we move on to consider the primary agent of the mission of God, namely, the people of God. We will follow the order of the biblical narrative as we walk first with Old Testament Israel. They were chosen in Abraham, redeemed out of Egypt, brought into covenant relationship at Sinai and called to a life of ethical distinctiveness from the nations. Each of these great successive themes is rich in missional significance. Thus we will be reflecting on

- election and mission (in chaps. 6-7)
- redemption and mission (in chaps. 8-9)
- covenant and mission (in chap. 10)
- ethics and mission (in chap. 11)

In part four we move to the wider canvas of the world itself—the earth, humanity, cultures and the nations. So we will explore first the missional implications of the goodness of creation and the connections between creation care and Christian mission (chap. 12). The paradox of human dignity (because we are made in God's image) and human depravity (because we are mired in rebellion against God's authority) has profound implications for mission, to be explored in chapter 13, along with reflections on the comprehensive response that gospel mission must make to the comprehensive onslaught of evil. The Wisdom tradition in the Old Testament is the most international of all biblical literature and provides a rich source for reflecting on a biblical theology and missiology of human cultures. The biblical world is a world full of nations, by God's creative intention. How do they figure in God's redemptive intentions? The Old Testament's eschatological vision for the nations surely provides some of the

most exciting of all its trajectories of missional rhetoric, to be explored in chapter 14, and then traced into the centrifugal horizons of New Testament mission theology and practice in chapter 15.

A diagrammatic outline of the book, then, might look something like this:

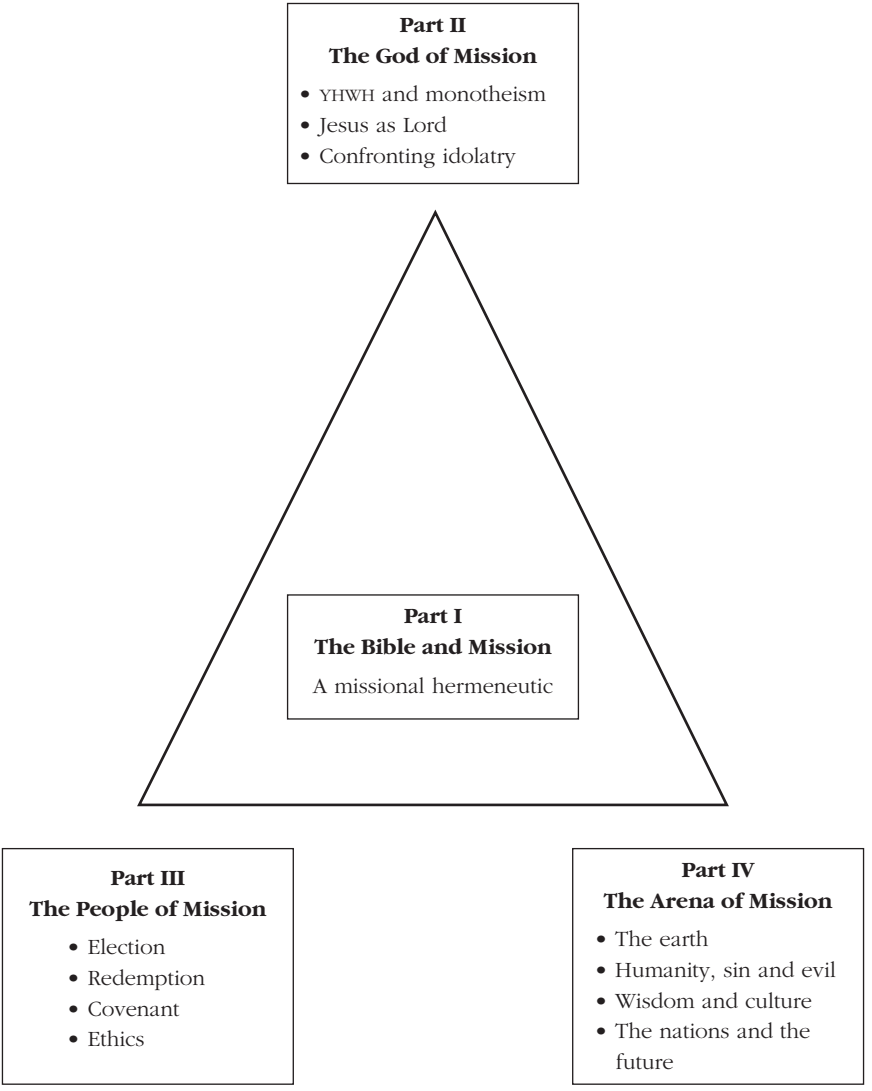

Figure 0.1

PART I THE BIBLE AND MISSION

Mission is what the Bible is all about; we could as meaningfully talk of the missional basis of the Bible as of the biblical basis of mission. Now this is a bold claim. One would not expect to be able to turn the other way any phrase that began "The biblical basis of . . . " There is, for example, a biblical basis for marriage, but there is not, obviously, a marital basis for the Bible. There is a biblical basis for work, but work is not what the Bible is all about. So isn't my assertion rather exaggerated or even conceited? Indeed, in view of the enormous variety of the contents of the Bible and the huge scholarly literature devoted to exploring every highway and byway of genre, authorship, context, ideology, date, editing, and history of all these documents, does it make sense to speak of the Bible being "all about" anything?

I take some encouragement in persisting with my claim from the words of the risen Jesus as recorded in Luke 24.[1] First to the two on the road to Emmaus and then later to the rest of the disciples, Jesus made himself as Messiah the focus of the whole canon of the Hebrew Scriptures that we now call the Old Testament (vv. 27, 44). So we are accustomed to speaking of the christological focus or center of the Bible. For Christians the whole Bible revolves around the person of Christ.

Jesus went on, however, beyond his *messianic* centering of the Old Testament Scriptures to their *missional* thrust as well.[2]

> Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them,

---

[1]This text was also taken as a starting point for a biblical theology of mission in 1971 by Henry C. Goerner, *Thus It Is Written* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971).

[2]The use of *missional* rather than *missiological* here seems appropriate in the light of the definitions in the introduction (pp. 24-25), since Jesus was not only offering a fresh theological reflection on the Scriptures but also committing his disciples to the mission, such reflection must now mandate ". . . must be preached," "You are witnesses . . . ."

> "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)

Jesus' whole sentence comes under the rubric "this is what is written." Luke does not present Jesus as quoting any specific verse from the Old Testament, but he claims that the mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness to the nations in his name is "what is written." He seems to be saying that the whole of the Scripture (which we now know as the Old Testament) finds its focus and fulfillment *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.[3] 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 *messianically* and *missionally.*

Paul, though he was not present for the Old Testament hermeneutics lecture on the day of resurrection, clearly found that his encounter with the risen Jesus and his recognition of Jesus as Messiah and Lord radically transformed his (Paul's) own way of reading his Scriptures. His hermeneutic now had the same double focus. Testifying before Festus he declares, "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light *to his own people and to the nations*" (Acts 26:22-23, modified NIV, emphasis added). This dual understanding of the Scriptures then shaped Paul's whole resumé as the apostle of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles.

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 missional reading of it. We read the Old Testament messianically or christologically in the light of Jesus; that is, we find in it a whole messianic theology and eschatology that we see as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. In doing so we follow his own example, of course, and that of his first followers and the authors of the Gospels. But what we have so often failed to do is to go beyond the mere satisfaction of ticking off so-called messianic predictions that have "been fulfilled." And we have failed to go further because we have not grasped the *missional* significance of the *Messiah.*

---

[3]I use Messiah here as the conventional indicator of the wide diversity of Old Testament terms used to describe the one through whom YHWH would bring about his expected redemption and restoration of Israel, even though "messiah" as a term in Hebrew is not used in the Old Testament as a functional title of the coming redeemer (except probably in Dan 9:25).

The Messiah was the promised one who would embody in his own person the identity and mission of Israel, as their representative, King, Leader and Savior. Through the Messiah as his anointed agent, YHWH, the God of Israel, would bring about all that he intended for Israel. But what was that mission of Israel? Nothing less than to be "a light to the nations," the means of bringing the redemptive blessing of God to all the nations of the world, as originally promised in the title deeds of the covenant with Abraham. For the God of Israel is also the Creator God of all the world.

Through the Messiah, therefore, the God of Israel would also bring about all that he intended for the nations. The eschatological redemption and restoration of Israel would issue in the ingathering of the nations. The full meaning of recognizing Jesus as Messiah then lies in recognizing also his role in relation to God's mission for Israel for the blessing of the nations. Hence, a messianic reading of the Old Testament has to flow on to a missional reading—which is precisely the connection that Jesus makes in Luke 24.

We recognize that the *christological focus of the Bible* operates in many different ways—some direct and others much more indirect. To speak of the Bible being "all about Christ" does not (or should not) mean that we try to find Jesus of Nazareth in every verse by some feat of imagination. Rather we mean that the person and work of Jesus become the central hermeneutical key by which we, as Christians, articulate the overall significance of these texts in both Testaments. Christ provides the hermeneutical matrix for our reading of the whole Bible.

The same is true of *the missiological focus of the Bible*. To say that the Bible is "all about mission" does not mean that we try to find something relevant to evangelism in every verse. We are referring to something deeper and wider in relation to the Bible as a whole. In a missiological approach to the Bible we are thinking of

- the purpose for which the Bible exists
- the God the Bible renders to us
- the people whose identity and mission the Bible invites us to share
- the story the Bible tells about this God and this people and indeed about the whole world and its future

This is a story that encompasses past, present and future, "life, the universe and everything." There is the closest connection between the biblical grand narrative and what is meant here by biblical mission. To attempt a missional hermeneutic, then, is to ask: Is it possible, is it valid, is it profitable, for Christians to read the Bible as a whole from a missional perspective, and what happens when

they do? Can we take mission as a hermeneutical matrix for our understanding of the Bible as a whole?

Before outlining in chapter two some contours of an approach that would answer those questions affirmatively, we will look first in chapter one at several ways in which the Bible is related to mission in contemporary writing on the matter—ways that have their own validity and significant contributions to make, but do not seem quite adequate to what I have in mind as a comprehensively missional approach to biblical hermeneutics. Chapter one, then, outlines some steps in the search for a missional hermeneutic—but in each case I believe we need to go further.

1

Searching for a Missional Hermeneutic

There are more than enough books offering biblical foundations for Christian mission.[1] Not all of them are of the same quality, however. Some are tracts to the already converted, providing justification for the task to which writer and readers are already committed. Some pay no attention to critical scholarship; others, perhaps, too much.[2] Too many, more culpably, pay scant attention to the bulk of the Bible itself—the Old Testament. What they seek to do, however, is clear: to find appropriate biblical justification and authority for the mission of

[1]The substance of this chapter, along with chap. 2, first appeared as Christopher J. H. Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 102-43. This fine volume contains other papers from the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar which are relevant to the overall theme of this book.

Regarding books offering biblical foundations for Christian mission, see, for example, as a short selection, Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962); David Burnett, *God's Mission, Healing the Nations,* rev. ed. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996); Roger Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Andreas J. Koestenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 2001); Richard R. de Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975); Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Ken Gnanakan, *Kingdom Concerns: A Biblical Theology of Mission Today* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1989; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993).

[2]There is, of course, a proper place for the critical disciplines in our ground-laying work for biblical theology, but we also need to go beyond those foundations to the Bible's missiological thrust. See David J. Bosch, "Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17 (1993): 437-51; and Charles Van Engen, "The Relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom,* ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), p. 34.

the Christian church to the nations. This may be in order to encourage those already engaged in such mission with the assurance that what they do is biblically grounded, or it may be to motivate those who are not yet engaged in it with the warning that they are living in disobedience to biblical imperatives.

Beyond "Biblical Foundations for Mission"

Biblical apologetic for mission. Such work, which might be called "biblical apologetic for mission," is of great importance. It would, after all, be a shattering thing if the church were suddenly seized by the conviction that all the missionary effort of two thousand years was grounded in no clear warrant of Scripture. From time to time, of course, there have been voices that argued exactly that. Indeed, it was against such voices, arguing theologically and biblically (as they thought), that mission to the nations was not required of good Christian citizens, that William Carey developed his biblical case for "the conversion of the heathens," becoming one of the first in the modern period to do so.[3]

The illustrious example of Carey, however, points to a shortcoming inherent in many "biblical foundations for mission" projects. Carey built the whole of the biblical section of his case on a single text, the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, arguing that it was as valid in his own day as in the days of the apostles, and that its imperative claim on the disciples of Christ had not lapsed with the first generation (as the opponents of foreign mission argued). While we would probably agree with his hermeneutical argument and that his choice of text was admirable, it leaves the biblical case vulnerably thin. We might defend Carey with the consideration that it was an achievement in his context to make a biblical case for mission at all, albeit from a single text. Less defensible has been the continuing practice in many missionary circles to go on and on building the massive edifice of Christian missionary agency on this one text, with varying degrees of exegetical ingenuity. If you put all your apologetic eggs in one textual basket, what happens if the handle breaks?

What happens, for example, if all the emphasis on the word *Go* in much mis-

[3]There were, of course (contrary to popular mythology), Protestant missionaries long before William Carey. However, Carey was among the first to include a clearly argued biblical case for establishing a missionary society—in his use of Matthew 28:18-20 as his key text in his justly famous *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792). David Bosch comments: "Protestants . . . have always prided themselves on the fact that they do what they do on the basis of what Scripture teaches. Still, in the case of the earliest Protestant missionaries, the Pietists and the Moravians, very little of a real biblical foundation for their missionary enterprises was in evidence. Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out such a foundation for the Church's missionary mandate" ("Hermeneutical Principles," p. 438).

sion rhetoric is undermined by the recognition that it is not an imperative at all in the text but a participle of attendant circumstances, an assumption—something taken for granted? Jesus did not primarily command his disciples to go; he commanded them to make disciples. But since he now commands them to make disciples of *the nations* (having previously restricted their mission to the borders of Israel during his earthly lifetime), they will have to go to the nations as a necessary condition of obeying the primary command.

What happens if one questions the common assumption that this text gives some kind of timetable for the return of Christ: he will come back just as soon as we have all the nations discipled? And is discipling a task that can ever be said to be completed (noting in passing that the text does say "disciple," not evangelize)? Doesn't every fresh generation of long-evangelized nations need fresh discipling? The Great Commission is an expanding and self-replicating task, not a ticking clock for the end times.

What happens if, even more controversially, one heeds the voices of critical scholars who question whether Jesus ever actually uttered (in Aramaic of course) the words recorded in Greek in Matthew 28:18-20?[4] In response to such a challenge one might make several defensive moves:

- seek to defend the authenticity of Matthew's text against the skeptics, and there are good grounds for doing so[5]
- argue that even if this text is not a transcripted recording of words from the mouth of Jesus, it does authentically express the inevitable implication of his identity and achievement as understood by the postresurrection church engaged in mission
- search for more texts to back up this one, to show that Matthew has indeed captured an essential element of the witness of Scripture and legitimately linked it with Jesus, who saw the mission of himself and his disciples as thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures

The last option is the most common. Most books offering a biblical basis of mission see their task as assembling as many texts as possible, texts that can be said to mandate or, in more indirect ways, support the missionary enterprise. Now this is important as far as it goes. Such biblical inducement to mission engagement is needed in churches that seem rather selective in their reading of the Bible.

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[4]As, e.g., Alan Le Grys does in *Preaching to the Nations: The Origin of Mission in the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1998).

[5]James LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to "All Nations" in the Light of Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

There are many ordinary and worthy Christians whose personal piety relishes those Scriptures that speak to them of their own salvation and security, that encourage them in times of distress, that guide them in their efforts to walk before the Lord in ways that please him. But it comes as a surprise for them to be confronted with such an array of texts that challenge them in relation to God's universal purpose for the world and the nations, the multicultural essence of the gospel and the missional essence of the church. But they need to get over that surprise and hear the burden of the Bible.

Equally, there are many theological scholars and students whose understanding of theology is bounded by the horizon of the classical shape of the curriculum, in which mission in any form (biblical, historical, theological, practical) seems remarkably absent. If it can be shown (as I believe it certainly can) that there is a surprisingly vast number of texts and themes in the Bible that relate to Christian mission, then missiology may regain respectability in the academy (of which there are encouraging signs already).

The danger of inadequate proof-texting. However, whether one text or many, the danger that attends all proof-texting is still present. We have already decided what we want to prove (that our missionary practice is biblical), and our collection of texts simply ratifies our preconception. The Bible is turned into a mine from which we extract our gems—"missionary texts." These texts may indeed sparkle, but simply laying out such gems on a string is not yet what one could call a missiological hermeneutic of the whole Bible itself. It does not even provide an adequate whole-Bible grounding for mission.

Commenting on this text-assembly approach, David Bosch observes:

> I am not saying that these procedures are illegitimate. They undoubtedly have their value. But their contribution towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal. This validity should not be deduced from isolated texts and detached incidents but only from the thrust of the central message of both Old and New Testaments. What is decisive for the Church today is not the formal agreement between what she is doing and what some isolated biblical texts seem to be saying but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture.[6]

Now we may feel that Bosch makes a false contrast here between things that are actually both necessary. There ought indeed to be formal agreement between what the church does and what biblical texts say. And texts with mission relevance are far from isolated. To point out the inadequacy of proof-texting through shallow and hermeneutically spurious sprinkling of texts at a problem

[6]Bosch, "Hermeneutical Principles," pp. 439-40.

is not by any means to reject the painstaking effort to prove a case through patient study of texts. Returning to Bosch's quote, articulating what "the thrust of the central message" or "the essence of the message of Scripture" might be is of course precisely the issue we are wrestling with in these pages. To be able to say that the thrust or essence is "mission" requires a lot more than just a list of helpfully benevolent texts.

A final limitation of this list of texts approach is that it has a suspicion of circularity. The danger is that one comes to the Bible with a massive commitment to the task of mission already in place, with a heritage of hallowed history, with methods and models in the present, and with strategies and goals for the future. All this we have assumed to be biblically warranted. So in searching the Scriptures for a biblical foundation for mission, we are likely to find what we brought with us—our own conception of mission, now comfortingly festooned with biblical luggage tags.

To establish a biblical grounding for *mission per se* is legitimate and essential. To claim to find biblical grounding for *all our missionary practice* is much more questionable. Some would say it is impossible—even dangerous. Rather than finding biblical legitimation for our activities, we should be submitting all our missionary strategy, plans and operations to biblical critique and evaluation. Marc Spindler articulates this point well:

> If "mission" is understood as the sum total of all actual missionary activities in the modern period or as everything undertaken under the banner of "missions," then an honest biblical scholar can only conclude that such a concept of mission does not occur in the Bible. . . . It is therefore anachronistic and hence meaningless to attempt to base all modern "missionary" activities on the Bible, that is, to seek biblical precedents or literal biblical mandates for all modern missionary activities. Mission today must, rather, be seen as arising from something fundamental, from the basic movement of God's people toward the world [i.e., with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ]. . . . The genuineness of our biblical grounding of mission stands or falls with the orientation of modern missions to this central thought. All "missionary" activities that have grown up in history must be reassessed from this perspective. Once again, a biblical grounding of mission by no means seeks to legitimate missionary activities that are actually being carried out. Its goal is, rather, evaluation of those activities in the light of the Bible.[7]

But in order to do that evaluative task, we have to have a clearer understand-

[7]Marc R. Spindler, "The Biblical Grounding and Orientation of Mission," in *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction,* ed. A. Camps, L. A. Hoedemaker and M. R. Spindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 124-25.

ing of that "something fundamental"—mission in its biblical sense or, more precisely, a missiological framework of biblical theology.

Beyond Multicultural Hermeneutical Perspectives

Global church, global hermeneutics. Slowly but inexorably the world of Western academic theology is becoming aware of the rest of the world. The impact of missiology has brought to the attention of the theological community in the West the wealth of theological and hermeneutical perspectives that are, in some cases at least, the product of the success of mission over the past centuries. Mission has transformed the map of global Christianity. From a situation at the beginning of the twentieth century when approximately 90 percent of all the world's Christians lived in the West or North (i.e., predominantly Europe and North America), the beginning of the twenty-first century finds at least 75 percent of the world's Christians in the continents of the South and East—Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia and the Pacific. The whole center of gravity of world Christianity has moved south—a phenomenon described, not entirely felicitously, as "the next Christendom."[8] Others prefer terms such as "The Global South" or "The Majority World."

We live in an age of a multinational church and multidirectional mission. And appropriately we now live with multicultural hermeneutics. People will insist on reading the Bible for themselves, you see. There is a great irony that the Western Protestant theological academy, which has its roots precisely in a hermeneutical revolution (the Reformation), led by people who claimed the right to read Scripture independently from the prevailing hegemony of medieval Catholic scholasticism, has been slow to give ear to those of other cultures who choose to read the Scriptures through their own eyes, though the situation is undoubtedly improving.[9]

The phenomenon of hermeneutical variety goes right back to the Bible itself, of course. The New Testament was born out of a hermeneutical revolution in

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[8]Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Cf. Christopher Wright, "Future Trends in Mission," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects,* ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), pp. 149-63, and bibliography there cited.

[9]Ignorance (whether innocent or wilful) of major issues in non-Western Christianity that non-Western theology must grapple with was illustrated for me at a combined faculty meeting of several London theological colleges. A Ghanaian lecturer at All Nations Christian College said that in his pastoral work in Ghana about at least 50 percent of his time went in helping believers, pastorally and theologically, in the area of dreams and visions and the spiritual world. A British lecturer at another college commented with ill-concealed disdain to me over lunch, "I rather thought we'd grown out of that kind of thing."

reading those Scriptures we now call the Old Testament. And within the early church itself there were different ways of handling those same Scriptures, depending on the context and need being addressed. Jewish and Greek forms of Christian identity, the product of the church's mission, felt themselves addressed and claimed in different ways by the demands of the Scriptures. Paul wrestles with these differences in Romans 14—15 for example. He makes his own position clear (in identifying himself theologically with those who called themselves "strong"), but he insisted that those who differed strongly on matters of interpretation and application of scriptural injunctions must accept one another without condemnation from one side or contempt from the other because of the prior claims of Christ and the gospel.

So a missional hermeneutic must include at least this recognition—the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts. Even when we affirm (as I certainly do) that the historical and salvation-historical context of biblical texts and their authors is of primary and objective importance in discerning their meaning and their significance, the plurality of perspectives from which readers read them is also a vital factor in the hermeneutical richness of the global church. What persons of one culture bring from that culture to their reading of a text may illuminate dimensions or implications of the text itself that persons of another culture may have not seen so clearly.[10]

Reflecting on such plurality, James Brownson argues that it is a *positive* thing with biblical roots and emerges out of the reality of missional engagement all over the world.

> I call the model I am developing a *missional* hermeneutic because it springs from a basic observation about the New Testament: namely, the early Christian movement that produced and canonized the New Testament was a movement with specifically *missionary* character. One of the most obvious phenomena of early Christianity is the way in which the movement crossed cultural boundaries and planted itself in new places. More than half of the New Testament was in fact written by people engaged in and celebrating this sort of missionary enterprise in the early church. This tendency of early Christianity to cross cultural boundaries is a

[10]Western translators of the book of Genesis into Chadian Arabic told me how Chadian believers, reading the stories of Joseph for the first time in their own language, discerned in the narrative, and especially its climax in chap. 50, aspects of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers and the protracted process of reconciliation and the removal of shame (which was not completed till after Jacob's death), which made profound sense to them in their own culture. They found, e.g., as much power in Joseph's personal commitment in Gen 50:21 as in his theological insight in Gen 50:20.

> fertile starting point for developing a model of biblical interpretation. It is fertile, especially for our purposes, because it places the question of the relationship between Christianity and diverse cultures at the very top of the interpretative agenda. This focus may be of great help to us in grappling with plurality in interpretation today. . . . The missional hermeneutic I am advocating begins by affirming the reality and inevitability of plurality in interpretation.[11]

Mission as a focus of hermeneutical coherence. However, it would be inadequate to think that a missional hermeneutic of the Bible amounted only to aggregating all the possible ways of reading its texts, from all the multicolored church and mission contexts around the globe. That is, of course, a fascinating and enriching thing to do. It is the common witness of those, including myself, who have lived and worked in cultures other than their own that reading and studying the Bible through the eyes of others is a challenging, mind-blowing and immensely instructive privilege. But are we left only with plurality? And if so, are we consigned to a relativism that declines any evaluation? Are there any boundaries as to readings of biblical texts that are right or wrong—or even just better or worse? And how are those boundaries or criteria to be defined?

It is important to point out here that "plurality in interpretation" is not pluralism as a hermeneutical ideology, nor is it a relativist charter. The starting point for understanding the meaning of biblical texts, in my view, remains a careful application of grammatico-historical tools in seeking to determine as far as is possible their authors' and editors' intended meaning in the contexts they were spoken or written. But as we apply those tools and then move to appropriate the significance and implications of these texts in our own context, cultural diversity plays its part in the hearing and receiving of them. But it is a diversity with methodological and theological limits.

Brownson goes on from his discussion of a missional hermeneutic of *diversity,* to argue for "a hermeneutic of *coherence*." The plurality of interpretative stances requires that we speak and listen to one another with respect and love, affirming our common humanity and our common commitment to the same biblical texts. "Once we have affirmed plurality, however, we need also to grapple with how the Bible may provide a center, an orienting point in the midst of such

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[11]James V. Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture,* ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 232-33. See also Christopher J. H. Wright, "Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue,* ed. William Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), reprinted in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24 (2000): 207-39.

diversity. What does it mean to speak *the truth* in love?"[12] The answer Brownson offers is the shape, the content and the claim of the biblical gospel itself. He agrees with scholars who have found a core of nonnegotiable affirmations in the varied New Testament presentations of the gospel and insists that this must provide the hermeneutical framework or matrix for assessing all claimed readings of the texts.

> An understanding of the hermeneutical function of the gospel is critical to a healthy approach to plurality and coherence in biblical interpretation. Interpretation will always emerge out of different contexts. There will always be different traditions brought to bear by various interpreters. . . . In the midst of all this diversity, however, the gospel functions as a framework that lends a sense of coherence and commonality.[13]

While agreeing wholeheartedly with this, I would go further and point out that the gospel (which Brownson discusses in exclusively New Testament terms) actually begins in Genesis (according to Paul in Gal 3:8). I would thus want to bring a whole-Bible perspective to the question of what Brownson calls "a hermeneutic of coherence."

This surely is also implied in Luke's messianic and missional hermeneutic of the Hebrew canon in Luke 24. Luke, who had lived and worked with Paul and who wrote the turbulent story of the earliest theological controversies in the church in Acts, knew perfectly well the diversity of interpretation of Old Testament texts even within the first generation of those who followed the Way of Jesus. Nevertheless, the words of Jesus "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24:45). In other words, *Jesus himself* provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is, in the light of the story that leads *up to* Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads *on from* Christ (missional reading). That is the story that flows from the mind and purpose of God in all the Scriptures for all the nations. That is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible.

Beyond Contextual Theologies and Advocacy Readings

Contexts and interests. The diversity of contextual approaches to reading the biblical texts includes those that are explicit in their interested stance—that is, readings done in the midst of and on behalf of or in the interests of particular groups of people. As against the rather blinkered view of theology that devel-

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[12]Ibid., p. 239.
[13]Ibid., pp. 257-58.

oped in the West since the Enlightenment, which liked to claim that it was scientific, objective, rational and free from either confessional presuppositions or ideological interests, theologies have emerged that declare such disinterested objectivity to be a myth—and a dangerous one in that it concealed hegemonic claims. These theologies argue that contexts do matter, that in the act of reading and interpreting the Bible, the questions of who you are, where you are, and whom you live among as a reader make a difference. The Bible is to be read precisely in and for the context in which its message must be heard and appropriated.

So these approaches to the Bible and theology came to be called "contextual theologies" within the Western academy. This term in itself betrayed the arrogant ethnocentricity of the West, for the assumption was that other places are contexts and they do their theology for those contexts; we, of course, have the real thing, the objective, contextless theology. This assumption is being rightly challenged, and the West is seen for what it is—a particular context of human culture, not necessarily any better or any worse than any other context for reading the Bible and doing theology.[14] But it does happen to be the context within which a certain mode of being Christian emerged and sustained itself for centuries, and then came to have a dominant position in the world, largely through missionary activity and its sequel. It is the cultural context that culminated in the great tower of Babel that we call Enlightenment modernity, which is now in the process of fragmenting, like its Genesis prototype, into the scattered diversity of postmodernity.

What many of these newer theologies have in common is their advocacy stance. That is, they arise from the conviction that it is fundamental to biblical faith to take a stand alongside the victims of injustice in any form. Thus the Bible is to be read with a liberationist hermeneutic—that is, with a concern to liberate people from oppression and exploitation. The earliest to make its impact on theological thinking in the West in the twentieth century was Liberation Theology from Latin America.[15] Theology was not to be done in the study and then

[14]I put it like this because there is no point, it seems to me, in swinging the pendulum from Western hermeneutical hegemony and ignorance of majority world biblical scholarship to the fashionable adulation of anything and everything that comes from the rest of the world and the rejection of established methods of grammatico-historical exegesis as somehow intrinsically Western, colonial or imperialistic.

[15]The contemporary time frame is deliberate since earlier centuries have seen their own theological developments with liberationist orientation. The Anabaptist movements of the Radical Reformation, for example, developed a range of hermeneutical strategies in their struggle against the intense persecution they encountered from both Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches and states.

applied in the world. Rather, action for and on behalf of the poor and oppressed was to be undertaken as a first priority, and then out of that commitment and praxis, theological reflection would follow. This presented a radical paradigm challenge to the standard Western way of doing theology. Other examples include Dalit Theology from India, Minjung Theology in Korea, and Black Theology in Africa and among African Americans. Feminist movements have also generated a broad and influential hermeneutic and theology, which has probably been more influential in the West than any of the others. All these approaches to the text offer a hermeneutic that is intentionally "interested." That is, they read in the interests of those they speak on behalf of—the poor, the outcastes, Blacks, women and so forth.

Exploding the missionary stereotype. So could a missional hermeneutic be presented as a liberation theology for missionaries? Or missiologists? The idea is mooted only half in jest. Given that missionaries in popular mythology are seen as the compromised adjuncts of colonialism and almost synonymous with Western arrogance and cultural totalitarianism, it might be more natural to propose a liberation theology *from* missionaries (which is what some radical forms of non-Western theology have in fact advocated).

However, the multinational nature of the global church has generated a new reality that is hardly yet acknowledged in the churches of the West, let alone in the popular culture and media there. And that is the fact that much more than half of all the Christian missionaries serving in the world today are not white and Western. It is the churches of the majority world that are now sending the majority of people into all kinds of crosscultural mission work. So one is as likely to meet an African missionary in Britain as a British one in Africa; the same is true for Brazilians in North Africa; Nigerians in parts of West Africa, where few white people now venture; and Koreans almost anywhere in the world. While it remains true that the United States still sends the highest number of missionaries to other parts of the world, the country that has the *second* highest number of crosscultural missionaries is India.[16] There are at least thirty times more Indian national missionaries than there are Westerners serving as missionaries within India.

What simply cannot be said of this new phenomenon of world mission is that all these Christian missionaries are agents of oppressive colonial powers or that they operate as a religious veneer to political or economic imperialism. On the

[16]And there are recent estimates that suggest that the number of Protestant crosscultural missionaries within India may already have surpassed the total number sent around the world from the United States.

contrary, for the most part Christian mission as carried out by the churches of the majority world operates out of powerlessness and relative poverty, and often in situations of considerable opposition and persecution. Such missionaries may not qualify as an oppressed class on the scale of, say, the poor in Latin America or the Dalits in India (though many Indian missionaries are also Dalits). But they could do with some liberation from the oppressive stereotypes and unjust caricatures that still surround their calling as well as from the marginalization that mission experiences in many churches and that missiology still battles with in the strongholds of theological academia.

So, yes, a missional hermeneutic is "interested." It reads the Bible and develops a biblical hermeneutic in the interests of those who have committed their own personal life story into the biblical story of God's purpose for the nations. But it does so with the even stronger conviction that such commitment should be the normal stance for the whole church, for, on this reading of Scripture, a church that is governed by the Bible cannot evade the missional thrust of the God and the gospel revealed there.

Missional reading embraces liberation. However, a missional hermeneutic goes further. It is not content to take its place as just one of several liberationist, advocacy or "interested" theologies on offer—though even as such, I contend, it has a right to exist, a right to advance and defend its own validity.[17] Rather, a broadly missional reading of the whole Bible, such as I hope to outline in these pages, actually subsumes liberationist readings into itself. Where else does the passion for justice and liberation that breathes in these various theologies come from if not from the biblical revelation of the God who battles with injustice, oppression and bondage throughout history right to the eschaton? Where else but from the God who triumphed climactically over all such wickedness and evil (human, historical and cosmic) in the cross and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ? Where else, in other words, but from the mission of God?

Biblically, all true liberation, all truly human best interests flow from God—not just *any* god but the God revealed as YHWH in the Old Testament and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. So inasmuch as the Bible narrates the passion and action (the mission) of *this* God for the liberation not only of humanity but of

[17]For a penetrating reflection on the plurality of readings of the biblical texts in the postmodern academy and the impact that this has had on the traditional hegemony of Western theology, particularly in the field of Old Testament studies, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 61-114. It seems to me that a missiological reading has as much right to set out its stall in the marketplace of contemporary hermeneutics as any other. See also my own comments in Wright, "Mosaic of Pluralisms."

the whole creation, a missional hermeneutic of Scripture must have a liberationist dimension. Once again we are driven back to see how important it is to ground our theology of mission (and our practice of it) in the mission of God and in our worshiping response to all that God is and does. From that perspective, we are advocates for *God* before we are advocates for *others*.

> This trinitarian grounding of mission should make clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of mission. Advocacy is what the church is about, being God's advocate in the world. The church must therefore begin its mission with doxology, otherwise everything peters out into social activism and aimless programs.[18]

Beyond Postmodern Hermeneutics

Plurality yes, relativism no. The rise of contextual theologies and then the recognition that all theology is in fact contextual, including the Western "standard" variety, has coincided with the arrival of postmodernism and its massive impact on hermeneutics (as on all the academic disciplines). The contemporary Western theological academy was largely built on an Enlightenment modernity worldview, which privileged objectivity and sought a singular all-embracing theological construct. Naturally, then, it had difficulty with theologies that seemed so situated in local and historical contexts. But the postmodern shift, in deliberate contrast, welcomes and elevates precisely such locality and plurality.

Postmodernism, however, not only celebrates the local, the contextual and the particular, it goes on to affirm that this is all we've got. There is no grand narrative (or metanarrative) that explains everything, and any claims that there is some truth for all that embraces the totality of life and meaning are rejected as oppressive power plays. Thus radically postmodern hermeneutics delights in a multiplicity of readings and perspectives but rejects the possibility of any single truth or unitive coherence.[19]

On the other hand, for two thousand years Christian mission, ever since the

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[18]Carl E. Braaten, "The Mission of the Gospel to the Nations," *Dialog* 30 (1991): 127. See also the still relevant reminder of the trinitarian, God-centered priorities of mission from Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh House Press, 1963; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1998).

[19]A major element in the challenge of postmodernity has come at the level of epistemology—how we know what we claim to know. This in turn has a significant impact on how we view mission, since Christian mission, if it is anything, is founded on what Christians claim to know about God and the world, about history and the future. Some of these epistemological problems for mission were tackled in a symposium recorded in J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

New Testament church, has wrestled with the problems of multiple cultural contexts. And yet in the midst of them all it has sustained the conviction that there is an objective truth for all in the gospel that addresses and claims people in any context. I would go further and argue that Israel in the Old Testament wrestled with a similar dynamic, namely, the need to relate the faith of YHWH to changing cultural and religious contexts through the millennium and more of Israel's history. Cultural plurality is nothing new for Christian mission. It is rather the very stuff of missional engagement and missiological reflection. We may be challenged by swimming in the postmodern pool, but we need not feel out of our depth there.[20]

In an interesting and complex article Martha Franks explores the way Christian theology of mission within the span of the twentieth century has moved from a fairly flat presentation of a single biblical message through a more historically nuanced understanding (as in the theology of von Rad) to a recognition of the plurality within the Bible and within the contexts of mission (as in Senior and Stuhlmueller). She observes how Lesslie Newbigin, for example, sensitively balances the particularity of election with the plurality of the Bible's vision for all nations and cultures, and sees the fullness of the gospel brought into ever more visible glory through the two-way task of crosscultural mission. She then goes on to link this to the concerns of postmodernism and claims that Christian mission has long preceded postmodernism in recognizing the validity of multiple contexts as "home" for the gospel.

Christian mission has long experience of "postmodern" challenges. Mission, Franks points out, has never been merely a matter of transferring an object from one subject to another. Rather, the living dynamic of the gospel has been such that, while it has an unchanging core because of its historical rootedness in the Scriptures and the Christ event, it has been received, understood, articulated, and lived out in myriad ways, both vertically through history and horizontally in all the cultures in which Christian faith has taken root.

> Newbigin . . . argues that mission work in the world's plurality is "two-way." Hearing the new understandings of the gospel that arise when the message of Christ is brought to a new context is an important part of understanding the whole meaning of the Lordship of Jesus. This insight from mission work is sympathetic to the similar suggestion of postmodernism with regard to the meaning of texts—that com-

[20]Andrew Walls provides richly stimulating surveys of the way the Christian church throughout history has developed ever-growing pluriformity, taking root in culture after culture, while preserving the essential nonnegotiable and transcultural objective core of the gospel. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

> munication between people, even when it is by book, is always "two-way." . . . Moreover, Newbigin's understanding of mission points to the fact that Christian missiology has long preceded the postmodern world in recognizing the possible problem of the fact that transplanting language and concepts from one context to another leads to wholly new ways of understanding them. Having centuries of experience with the very problem on which the postmoderns have tumbled, it is appropriate to respond to the challenge of postmodernism not with revulsion, but with counsel. We know about these questions. We have something to offer.[21]

What we have to offer, I contend, is a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. The Bible got there before postmodernity was dreamed of—the Bible which glories in *diversity* and celebrates multiple human *cultures,* the Bible which builds its most elevated theological claims on utterly *particular* and sometimes very *local* events, the Bible which sees everything in *relational,* not abstract, terms, and the Bible which does the bulk of its work through the medium of *stories.*

All of these features of the Bible—cultural, local, relational, narrative—are welcome to the postmodern mind. Where the missional hermeneutic will part company with radical postmodernity, is in its insistence that through all this variety, locality, particularity and diversity, the Bible is nevertheless actually *the* story. This is the way it is. This is the grand narrative that constitutes truth for all. And within *this* story, as narrated or anticipated by the Bible, there is at work the God whose mission is evident from creation to new creation. This is the story of God's mission. It is a coherent story with a universal claim. But it is also a story that affirms humanity in all its particular cultural variety. This is the universal story that gives a place in the sun to all the little stories.[22]

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[21]Martha Franks, "Election, Pluralism, and the Missiology of Scripture in a Postmodern Age," *Missiology* 26 (1998): 342.

[22]Richard Bauckham explores the constant biblical oscillation between the particular and the universal, and its implications for a missiological hermeneutic, with special attention to its relevance to postmodernity, in *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003).

2

Shaping a Missional Hermeneutic

In chapter one I noted some of the steps that have been taken already toward a missiological reading of the Bible, but argued that none of them quite meets the challenge. Some responsibility inevitably then rests on the person who points out the deficiencies of others to come up with something more adequate. With some diffidence, since I am sure the task of establishing missiology as a viable framework for biblical hermeneutics is still very much in the construction stage, I offer the reflections of this chapter as at least some scaffolding for the project.

The Bible as the Product of God's Mission

A missional hermeneutic of the Bible begins with the Bible's very existence. For those who affirm some relationship (however articulated) between these texts and the self-revelation of our Creator God, the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and us, human beings in God's own image, but wayward and wanton. The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God.

> The very existence of the Bible is incontrovertible evidence of the God who refused to forsake his rebellious creation, who refused to give up, who was and is determined to redeem and restore fallen creation to his original design for it. . . . The very existence of such a collection of writings testifies to a God who breaks through to human beings, who disclosed himself to them, who will not leave them unilluminated in their darkness, . . . who takes the initiative in re-establishing broken relationships with us.[1]

[1]Charles R. Taber, "Missiology and the Bible," *Missiology* 11 (1983): 232.

Furthermore, the processes by which these texts came to be written were often profoundly missional in nature. Many of them emerged out of events or struggles or crises or conflicts in which the people of God engaged with the constantly changing and challenging task of articulating and living out their understanding of God's revelation and redemptive action in the world. Sometimes these were struggles internal to the people of God themselves; sometimes they were highly polemical struggles with competing religious claims and worldviews that surrounded them. So a missional reading of such texts is very definitely not a matter of (1) finding the "real" meaning by objective exegesis, and only then (2) cranking up some "missiological implications" as a homiletic supplement to the text itself. Rather, it is to see how a text often has its *origin* in some issue, need, controversy or threat that the people of God needed to address in the context of their mission. The text in itself is a product of mission in action.

This is easily demonstrated in the case of the New Testament.[2] Most of Paul's letters were written in the heat of his missionary efforts: wrestling with the theological basis of the inclusion of the Gentiles, affirming the need for Jew and Gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church, tackling the baffling range of new problems that assailed young churches as the gospel took root in the world of Greek polytheism, confronting incipient heresies with clear affirmations of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and so on.

And why were the Gospels so called? Because they were written to explain the significance of the *evangel*—the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, especially his death and resurrection. Confidence in these things was essential to the missionary task of the expanding church. And the person to whom we owe the largest quantity of the New Testament, Luke, shapes his two-volume work in such a way that the missionary mandate to the disciples to be Christ's witnesses to the nations comes as the climax to volume one and the introduction to volume two.

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[2]Marion Soards surveys four current issues in New Testament studies (first-century Judaism, the life of Jesus, Pauline theology, and the character of the early church) and shows how they are relevant to mission studies also. But he concludes with a converse comment in line with the point being made here: "Mission studies should remind biblical scholars that many of the writings that we study (often in painstaking and even painful detail) came to be because of the reality of mission. An awareness of, and a concern with, the key issues of mission studies may well help biblical studies find foci that will bring deeper appreciation of the meaning of the Bible." Marion L. Soards, "Key Issues in Biblical Studies and Their Bearing on Mission Studies," *Missiology* 24 (1996): 107. With this I fully agree. See also Andreas J. Koestenberger, "The Place of Mission in New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Determine the Significance of Mission Within the Scope of the New Testament's Message as a Whole," *Missiology* 27 (1999), and the works referred to there.

Thus Howard Marshall sees this as the focal point of New Testament theology. Obviously all the New Testament documents hang together around their recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as Savior and Lord.

> It may, however, be more helpful to recognize them more specifically as the documents of a mission. The subject matter is not, as it were, Jesus in himself or God in himself but Jesus in his role as Savior and Lord. *New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology.* By this I mean that the documents came into being as the result of a two-part mission, first the mission of Jesus sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Savior and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows. The theology springs out of this movement and is shaped by it, and in turn the theology shapes the continuing mission of the church. . . . The New Testament thus tells the story of the mission and lays especial emphasis on expounding the message proclaimed by the missionaries.[3]

But also in the case of the Old Testament we can see that many of these texts emerged out of the engagement of Israel with the surrounding world, in the light of the God they knew in their history and in covenantal relationship. People produced texts in relation to what they believed God had done, was doing or would do in their world. The Torah records the exodus as an act of YHWH that comprehensively confronted and defeated the power of Pharaoh and all his rival claims to deity and allegiance. It presents a theology of creation that stands in sharp contrast to the polytheistic creation myths of Mesopotamia. The historical narratives portray the long and sorry story of Israel's struggle with the culture and religion of Canaan, a struggle reflected also in the preexilic prophets. Exilic and postexilic texts emerge out of the task that the small remnant community of Israel faced to define their continuing identity as a community of faith in successive empires of varying hostility or tolerance. Wisdom texts interact with international wisdom traditions in the surrounding cultures, but do so with staunch monotheistic disinfectant. And in worship and prophecy, Israelites reflect on the relationship between their God, YHWH, and the rest of the nations—sometimes negatively, sometimes positively—and on the nature of their own role as YHWH's elect priesthood in their midst.

All of the items referred to in the last paragraph deserve chapters of their own, and some of them will get one. The point being made here is simply that the Bible is in so many ways a *missional phenomenon* in itself. The individual

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[3]I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 34-35, emphasis added.

texts within it often reflect the struggles of being a people with a mission in a world of competing cultural and religious claims. And the canon eventually consolidates the recognition that it is through these texts that the people whom God has called to be his own (in both Testaments) has been shaped as a community of memory and hope, a community of mission, failure, and striving. Indeed, as David Filbeck has observed, this missiological thrust provides theological coherence to the Bible, including the relationship of the Testaments.

> 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 motif. It is the logical connection between the Testaments that many modern theologians unfortunately seem to despair of ever finding. . . . 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.[4]

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.*[5]

Biblical Authority and Mission

The Great Commission implies an imperative, a mandate. So it also presupposes an authority behind that imperative. We find this and other similar missionary imperatives in the Bible. So our involvement in mission is, at one level, a matter of obedience to the authority of Scripture, regarded as the Word of God. This offers an immediate illustration of one of the distinctions I referred to in chapter one.

A *biblical basis of mission* seeks out those biblical texts that express or describe the missionary imperative, on the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.

A *missional hermeneutic of the Bible,* however, explores the nature of biblical authority itself in relation to mission. Does a missional approach to the Bible help us in articulating what we mean by biblical authority?

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[4]David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Billy Graham Center, 1994), p. 10.

[5]On the need to take the Bible as a whole in constructing a theology of mission, see also, Charles Van Engen, "The Relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom,* ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), pp. 27-36.

Authority as command. This is not the place for a full account of the Christian doctrine of the authority of the Bible. One aspect, however, is important for our purpose here. For many people the concept of authority that they subconsciously bring to their understanding of the authority of the Bible is a military one. Authority is what gives the officer the right to issue commands. Commands are to be obeyed. The Bible is our authority. It issues the commands and tells us what to do or not to do. Authority, then, is simply a matter of orders on the one hand and obedience on the other.

In missionary circles the Great Commission is frequently surrounded with military metaphors of this sort. This text is said to provide the church's marching orders, for example, not to mention the whole range of other military metaphors that follow—warfare, mobilization, recruits, strategies, targets, campaigns, crusades, frontlines, strongholds, the missionary "force" (i.e., personnel) and the like. The language of authority seems easily converted into the language of mission, with the military metaphor functioning as the dynamic connector.

However, even if we strongly affirm our acceptance of biblical authority, the association of authority primarily with military-style command does not sit comfortably with much of the actual material in the Bible. There are of course many commands in the Bible, and indeed the psalmists celebrate this as a mark of God's goodness and grace (e.g., Ps 19; 119). Those commands that we do have from God are to be cherished for the light, guidance, security, joy and freedom they bring (to mention a few of the benefits praised by the psalmists). But the bulk of the Bible is not command—in the sense of issuing direct commands either to its first readers or to future generations of readers, including ourselves.

Much more of the Bible is narrative, poetry, prophecy, song, lament, visions, letters and so on. What is the authority latent in those forms of utterance? How does a poem or a story or somebody's letter to somebody else tell *me* what *I* must do or not do? Is that even what it was intended to do? And more importantly in relation to our task here, how do such nonimperative sections of the Bible connect to mission, if mission is seen primarily as obedience to a command? I would suggest that it is partly because we have so tightly bound our understanding of mission to a single (and undeniably crucial) imperative of Jesus that we have difficulty making connections between mission and the rest of the Scriptures, where those other Scriptures are not obviously or grammatically imperative. We do not perceive any missional *authority* in such nonimperative texts because we conceive authority only in terms of *commands*.

Authority and reality. We need to widen considerably our understanding of the word *authority*. In his majestic apologia for evangelical biblical ethics, *Resurrection and Moral Order,* Oliver O'Donovan argues that authority is a di-

mension of reality that constitutes sufficient and meaningful grounds for action. The created order itself, by its objective reality, provides an authority structure within which we have freedom to act (both in the sense of permission to act and a wide range of options).[6] Authority is not just a list of positive commands; authority includes legitimating permission. Authority authorizes; it grants freedom to act within boundaries. Thus the authority of my driver's license and my bishop's license as an ordained presbyter in the Church of England is not to order me every day where I must drive or what sacred service I must render. Rather these licenses *authorize me* to make those choices, give me freedom and authority to drive where I wish or to take services, preach, baptize and so forth. In those contexts I am an *authorized* person, liberated by, while still subject to, the authority of the realities that stand behind those documents (the laws of the road; the canons of the church).

Authority then is the predicate of reality, the source and boundary of freedom. Now, as O'Donovan argues, the created order itself as the fundamental reality structure of our existence is also a structure of authority. A physical brick wall, for example, by its simple real existence constitutes an authority. You have freedom on this side of it or on that side of it. But your freedom ends when you attempt to run through it at high speed. It exerts its authority rather abruptly. Gravity as a force in the physical universe is an authority built into the way the universe exists. For us humans it authorizes an immense freedom of action on and above the surface of the planet provided we work with it. But it also sets limits to that freedom. You may freely choose to step off a cliff, but the authority of gravity will decree it to be the last free choice you make. Reality kicks in. The authority of the laws of nature lies in the fact that nature itself is real. The universe is simply there, and we are not at liberty to behave as though it weren't.

Now, how do these considerations help our understanding of the authority of the Bible? The authority of the Bible is that it brings us into contact with reality—primarily the reality of God himself whose authority stands behind even that of creation. In fact, the Bible renders to us several connected realities, each of which has its own intrinsic, predicated authority. Reading and knowing the Scriptures causes us to *engage with reality*. That in turn functions to authorize

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[6]Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). I have discussed O'Donovan's insight further in relation to the authority of Scripture in an age of historical and cultural relativism in Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chap. 2. The topic is developed further in relation to Old Testament ethics in Christopher J. H Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

and to set boundaries around our freedom to act in the world. And more specifically for our purpose here, these realities authorize our action in mission. They make our mission appropriate, legitimate and indeed necessary and inevitable. The authority for our mission flows from the Bible because the Bible reveals the reality on which our mission is based.

I have three realities in mind, which are rendered to us first by the Old Testament Scriptures and then confirmed in the New. In these biblical texts we encounter the reality of *this God,* the reality of *this story* and the reality of *this people.*

The reality of this God. It is becoming increasingly important in any talk of God to be clear who we are talking about. *God* is merely an Anglo-Saxon monosyllable that in its origins would more commonly have been plural, *the gods*—the generic term for the deities of the early tribes and settlers of northern Europe. The Bible introduces us to the very specific, named and biographied God known as YHWH, the Holy One of Israel (and other titles). This is the God whom Jesus called Abba. This is the God worshiped as the Lord by Israelites and as Father, Son and Holy Spirit by Christians. This is not a generic god at all.

While the Bible does insist that there is much that has been disclosed about this God through the natural world around us (which is in fact this God's creation), it is fundamentally the texts of the canon of Scripture in both testaments that bring us knowledge of this God. Not only is YHWH the God "enthroned as the Holy One" and "the praise of Israel" (Ps 22:3), he is the God rendered to us by the lips and pens of Israel.[7] YHWH is the reality to which the Old Testament Scriptures testify. His, therefore, is the authority that those Scriptures mediate, because we have no other access to YHWH's reality than through these Scriptures.

This "rendering of God" in the Old Testament includes both God's identity and God's character. The point here is simply this: if the God YHWH, who is rendered to us in these texts, is really God, then that reality (or rather *his reality)* authorizes a range of responses as appropriate, legitimate and indeed imperative. These include not only the response of worship but also of ethical living in accordance with this God's own character and will, and a missional orientation that commits my own life story into the grand story of God's purpose for the nations and for creation. Mission flows from the reality of this God—the biblical God. Or to put it another way: mission is authorized by the reality of this God.

The reality of this story. That the Old Testament tells a story needs no defense.

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[7]It will be evident that I am indebted here to the fascinating study of Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament,* Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

My point is much greater, however. The Old Testament tells its story as *the* story or, rather, as a 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. And on this overarching story is based a worldview that, like all worldviews and metanarratives, claims to explain the way things are, how they have come to be so, and what they ultimately will be.[8]

The story that engages us in the Old Testament answers the four fundamental worldview questions that all religions and philosophies answer in one way or another:[9]

- *Where are we?* (What is the nature of the world around us?)
  Answer: We inhabit the earth, which is part of the good creation of the one living, personal God, YHWH.
- *Who are we?* (What is the essential nature of humanity?)
  Answer: We are human persons made by this God in God's own image, one of God's creatures but unique among them in spiritual and moral relationships and responsibility.
- *What's gone wrong?* (Why is the world in such a mess?)
  Answer: Through rebellion and disobedience against our Creator God, we have generated the mess that we now see around us at every level of our lives, relationships and environment.
- *What is the solution?* (What can we do about it?)
  Answer: Nothing in and of ourselves. But the solution has been initiated by God through his choice and creation of a people, Israel, through whom God intends eventually to bring blessing to all nations of the earth and ultimately to renew the whole creation.

Now the reality of this story is such that it includes us in its scope, for it points to a universal future that embraces all the nations. It is the story that is taken up without question (though not without surprise) in the New Testament. It is the story that stretches from Genesis to Revelation, not merely as a good yarn or

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[8]On the recent emphasis on the importance of story in biblical hermeneutics, its relevance to missiology, and a defense of treating the biblical story as metanarrative, see Craig Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 144-71.

[9]It will be evident here that I am indebted to the helpful analysis of worldviews in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

even as a classic of epic literature, but fundamentally as a *rendering of reality*—an account of the universe we inhabit and of the new creation we are destined for. We live in a storied universe.

And once again, such a rendering of reality carries its intrinsic authority. For if this is truly the way things are, how they have become so and where they are going, then there are all kinds of implications for how we ought to respond personally and collectively. Again, worship, ethics and mission all spring to mind. These responses, including mission, are authorized by the reality of this story.

The reality of this people. The third reality, which the Old Testament Scriptures render to us, is that of the people of Israel. Ancient Israel, with their distinctive view of their own election, history and relationship to their God, YHWH, is a historical reality of enormous significance to the history of the rest of humanity.[10] Christian mission to the nations is deeply rooted in the calling of this people and in the way they saw themselves and their story. In Old Testament terms the story had a past and a future, and both are important in shaping ethical and missional response, for, like Israel, the church is also a community of memory and hope.

Israel's *celebration of its past* is legendary. It was the very stuff of their existence, for it rendered to them not only their own identity and mission, but also that of YHWH, their God.

> Sing to the LORD, praise his *name;*
> proclaim his *salvation* day after day.
> Declare his *glory* among the nations,
> his *marvelous deeds* among all peoples. (Ps 96:2-3 emphasis added)

The name, salvation and glory of YHWH were all bound up with "his marvelous deeds." YHWH was known through what he had done, and Israel knew that to preserve YHWH's identity they must tell this story—whether to themselves or (in some way that remained a mystery in Old Testament times) to the nations. For in the telling of the story stood the rendering of the God who was its prime character. So Israel told the story as a bulwark against idolatry (Deut 4:9-40). They told the story as an explanation and motivation for the law (Deut 6:20-25). They told the story as a rebuke to themselves (Ps 105—106; Mic 6:1-8; Amos 2:9-11) or to YHWH himself (Ps 44; 89). They told the story as a comfort and anchor for hope (Jer 32:17-25). Israel's whole theology depended on its memory,

[10]Among Old Testament scholars there is, of course, considerable debate over their historical reconstruction of the events by which Israel emerged in the land of Canaan and into the annals of history. But that historical debate need not concern us here since, by whatever process, Israel certainly did emerge and produce a society and a body of traditions and texts that have had an unquestionably profound impact on subsequent human history.

and Israel's memory was constitutive of their peoplehood. The same identity as the people of God with this storied memory constitutes also for us the authority for our mission.

But the story Israel told had an *anticipated future* right at its beginning. They were a people with a future in the purposes of God. The call of Abraham included the promise that through his descendants God intended to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. That vision shone with greatly varying degrees of clarity or obscurity at different eras of Israel's life, but there is in many places an awareness of the nations as spectators both of what God did in and for Israel, and of how Israel responded positively or negatively (Deut 4:5-8; 29:22-28; Ezek 36:16-23). Ultimately, Israel existed *for the sake of* the nations. We will explore these themes in depth, of course, in the chapters to follow.

So there is a teleological (purposeful) thrust to Israel's existence as a people and the story they narrated and projected. Here is a God with a mission and a people with a mission. Israel's mission was to be a light to the nations so that ultimately "all flesh will see the glory of the LORD" (Is 40:5). Such a vision undoubtedly generated a range of responses within Israel itself. For if this is the future guaranteed by the faithfulness of God, what should be the impact on the way Israel should live now? The question remains authoritative for us too. For we share the same vision of the future, one which to the eyes of faith is a reality, "the substance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1 KJV), and thereby an ethic-generating and mission-mandating authority for those who live in its light.

So the reality of this people, rendered to us through the texts of the Old Testament, carries authority for an ethic of gratitude in view of God's actions for Israel in the past and carries authority also for our missional intentionality in view of God's purposes for humanity in the future.

Authority and Jesus. These three features of the Old Testament—God, story, and people—are affirmed as realities also for Christian believers in the New Testament. They are all, in fact, focused on Jesus in such a way that their authority and missional relevance is not only sustained but enhanced and transformed for those who are in Christ. At this point we are approaching the missiological significance of a truly *biblical* (i.e., cross-testamental) theology.

In Jesus we meet *this God*. The New Testament unquestionably affirms (as we will see in chap. 4) that Jesus of Nazareth shares the identity and character of YHWH and ultimately accomplishes what only YHWH could.[11] So to know Jesus

[11]See especially, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), and Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), my discussion in chap. 4.

as Savior and Lord is to know the reality of the living God. It is to know the way, the truth and the life, the Word, the Creator, Sustainer and heir of the universe. As it was for Israel in knowing YHWH, so for us knowing the reality of Jesus carries its own authority for how we are to live and act in God's world.

In Jesus we have the climax of *this story* and the guarantee of its final ending. This story is also our story, for if we are in Christ then, according to Paul, we are also in Abraham and heirs according to the promise. Our future is the future promised by God to Abraham, achieved by Jesus and to be enjoyed by the whole of redeemed humanity from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev 7:9-10). Our lives also then are to be shaped by the gratitude that looks back to what God has promised and the mission that looks forward to what God will accomplish.[12]

In Jesus we have become part of *this people,* sharing the comprehensive range of identity and responsibility that was theirs. For through the cross and the gospel of the Messiah Jesus, we have become citizens of God's people, members of God's household, the place of God's dwelling (Eph 2:11—3:13). Such an identity and belonging generate an ethical and a missional responsibility in the church and the world, which the New Testament spells out in some detail.

So then our mission certainly flows from the authority of the Bible. But that authority is far richer and deeper than one big biblical command we must obey. Rather, our obedience to the Great Commission, and even the Great Commission itself, is set within the context of these realities. The Great Commission is not something extra or exotic. Rather, the authority of the Great Commission itself is embedded

- in the reality of the *God* whose universal authority has been given to Jesus
- in the reality of the *story* that the Great Commission both presupposes and envisages
- in the reality of the *people* who are now to become a self-replicating community of disciples among all nations

This is the God we worship, this is the story we are part of, this is the people we belong to. How should we then live? What then is our mission?

Biblical Indicatives and Imperatives in Mission

Another way of looking at this issue is to focus on the point often observed in

[12]A fine popular-level portrayal of the whole biblical story as the story of God's commitment to his mission, with its challenge to our participation in it, is provided by Philip Greenslade, *A Passion for God's Story* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2002).

biblical theology, namely, that biblical *imperatives* are characteristically founded on biblical *indicatives*. An indicative is simply a statement of reality (or it claims to be). It is an affirmation or declaration or proposition: This is so; this is how things are. By situating its imperatives in the indicative contexts we have just considered, the Bible effectively grounds their authority in those realities.

A familiar example of this dynamic is the way the Old Testament law is set within a narrative context. The narrative expresses the indicative: Here is what has happened in your history, and these are the things that YHWH your God has done. Then the law expresses the responsive imperative: Now then, this is how you must behave in the light of such facts.

Exodus 19:3-6 classically articulates this order:

> You have seen what I did . . . (the indicative)
> Now, if you will obey me fully and keep my covenant, then . . . (the imperative)

Similarly, the Decalogue begins not with the first imperative commandment but with the indicative statement of God's identity and Israel's story (so far): "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex 20:2). In other words, the indicative of God's grace comes before and is the foundation and authority for the imperative of the law and responsive obedience.

This fundamental priority of grace over law is even more explicit in the answer the father is instructed to give his son when he asks (as countless Christians have done ever since, and might have saved themselves much theological blood, sweat and ink by attending to the father's answer), "What is [the meaning of] all this law?" The father responds not simply with a reinforced imperative ("Just do it") but with a story, the exodus story, the old, old story of YHWH and his love—that is, with the indicative of redemption. The very meaning of the law is grounded in the gospel of God's saving grace in history (Deut 6:20-25).

Now when we think of the Great Commission, it is sometimes pointed out that whereas the text is never actually given that title in the Gospels themselves, Jesus did emphatically endorse the Great *Commandment,* in so many words. Asked about the greatest commandment in the law (a familiar debating point in his day), he pointed to the magnificent *šĕma*ʿ of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is about loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, complementing it with Leviticus 19:18, the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. But what we must not miss is that both these commandments are founded on indicatives about the identity, uniqueness, singularity and holiness of YHWH as God.

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut 6:4)

> Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy. (Lev 19:2)

It is *the reality of YHWH* that constitutes the authority for these greatest commandments, on which, Jesus declared, hang all the rest of the law and the prophets.

Here, then, we have a very clear imperative—to love God with the totality of our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This could easily be described, with even more textual justification, as "the great commission," for it governs the whole of life whatever our specific calling. This fundamental twin commandment certainly precedes, underlies and governs the so-called Great Commission itself, for we cannot make disciples of the nations without love for God and love for them.

So it is no surprise, therefore, to find that when we come to the Great Commission, it too follows the same formula: indicative followed by imperative. Jesus begins with the monumental cosmic claim, words that echo the affirmation of Moses about YHWH himself (Deut 4:35, 39), that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). This is the reality behind the command, the indicative behind the imperative. The identity and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the cosmic indicative on which the mission imperative stands authorized.

But in order to understand all that such an indicative claim for Jesus implies and includes, we need the whole of the Scriptures—as he himself affirmed when, in Luke's version, he draws both the significance of his own messianic identity and the anticipation of the church's missional future from the bold indicative "this is what is written" (Lk 24:46). We need, then, both a missional hermeneutic of the *whole* Bible and its great indicatives as well as committed obedience to a major imperative text like the Great Commission.[13]

A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the Great *Commission* (though it will assuredly include that as a matter of nonnegotiable importance), nor even to reflect on the missional implications of the Great *Commandment*. For behind both it will find the Great *Communication*—the revelation of the identity of God, of God's action in the world and God's saving purpose for all creation. And for the fullness of this communication we need the whole Bible in all its parts and genres, for God has given

[13]This point is made, somewhat differently but with a similar desire to avoid "the abuse of the imperative," by Graeme Goldsworthy. He also notes that the apparent absence of a missionary mandate in the Old Testament (i.e., that Israelites should actually go to the nations) is balanced by the assumption of what Israel was simply meant to be in the world: "The function of Israel in the purposes of God to bring salvation to the nations is in the indicative, not the imperative." Graeme L. Goldsworthy, "The Great Indicative: An Aspect of a Biblical Theology of Mission," *Reformed Theological Review* 55 (1996): 7.

us no less. A missional hermeneutic takes the indicative and the imperative of the biblical revelation with equal seriousness, and interprets each in the light of the other.

Such mutual interpretation of indicative and imperative in the light of each other means that, on the one hand, biblical missiology (like biblical and systematic theology) revels in exploring the great indicative themes and traditions of the biblical faith in all their complexity and remarkable coherence. But biblical missiology recognizes, on the other hand, that if all this indicative theology is indicative of *reality,* then that carries a massive missional imperative for those who claim this worldview as their own. If this is how it really is with God, humanity and the world, then what claim does that make on the life of the church and individual believers?

Conversely, a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible will not become obsessed with only the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission, or be tempted to impose on them one assumed priority or another (e.g., evangelism or social justice or liberation or ecclesiastical order as the only "real" mission). Rather we will set those great imperatives within the context of their foundational indicatives, namely, all that the Bible affirms about God, creation, human life in its paradox of dignity and depravity, redemption in all its comprehensive glory, and the new creation in which God will dwell with his people.

A missional hermeneutic, then, cannot read biblical indicatives without their implied imperatives. Nor can it isolate biblical imperatives from the totality of the biblical indicative. It seeks a holistic understanding of mission from a holistic reading of the biblical texts.

The Biblical Theocentric Worldview and the Mission of God

However, even if we accept, returning to the introduction, that Jesus offers us a Messiah-focused and mission-generating hermeneutic of the Scriptures, we may still query the claim that somehow there is a missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible such that "mission is what it's all about." This uneasiness stems from the persistent, almost subconscious, paradigm that mission is fundamentally and primarily something *we* do—a human task of the church. This is especially so if we fall into the reductionist habit of using the word *mission* (or *missions*) as more or less synonymous with evangelism. Quite clearly the whole Bible is not just about evangelism, and I am certainly not trying to claim that it is—even though evangelism is certainly a fundamental part of biblical mission as entrusted to us. To be sure, evangelism *is* something we do and it *is* validated by

clear biblical imperatives. But it will not bear the weight of the case for saying that the whole Bible can be hermeneutically approached from a missional perspective.

The appropriateness of speaking of "a missional basis of the Bible" becomes apparent only when we shift our paradigm of mission from

- our human agency to the ultimate purposes of God himself
- mission as "missions" that we undertake, to mission as that which God has been purposing and accomplishing from eternity to eternity
- an anthropocentric (or ecclesiocentric) conception to a radically theocentric worldview

In shifting our perspective in this way and trying to come to a biblical definition of what we mean by mission, we are in effect asking the question, *Whose mission is it anyway?* The answer, it seems to me, could be expressed as a paraphrase of the song of the redeemed in the new creation. "Salvation belongs to our God, / who sits on the throne, / and to the Lamb" (Rev 7:10). Since the whole Bible is the story of how this God, "our God," has brought about his salvation for the whole cosmos (represented in concentric circles around God's throne in the magnificent neck-craning vision of Revelation 4—7), we can affirm with equal validity, "Mission belongs to our God." *Mission is not ours; mission is God's.* Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in. Or, as has been nicely put, it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God's mission.[14]

A missional hermeneutic of the Bible, then, begins there—with the mission of God—and traces the flow of all other dimensions of mission as they affect human history from that center and starting point.

God with a mission. The term *missio Dei,* "the mission of God," has a long history.[15] It seems to go back to a German missiologist Karl Hartenstein. He coined it as a way of summarizing the teaching of Karl Barth, "who, in a lecture on mission in 1928, had connected mission with the doctrine of the trinity. Barth and Hartenstein want to make clear that mission is grounded in an intratrinitarian movement of God himself and that it expresses the power of God over his-

[14]See chap. 2, "God's Mission and the Church's Response," of J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 23-37.

[15]For a brief survey of the history, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 389-93.

tory, to which the only appropriate response is obedience."[16] So the phrase originally meant "the sending of God"—in the sense of the Father's sending of the Son and their sending of the Holy Spirit. All human mission, in this perspective, is seen as a participation in and extension of this divine sending.

The phrase became popular in ecumenical circles after the Willingen world mission conference of 1952, through the work of Georg Vicedom.[17] It had the strength of connecting mission to the theology of the Trinity—an important theological gain. Mission flows from the inner dynamic movement of God in personal relationship. But in some circles the concept of *missio Dei* then became seriously weakened by the idea that it referred simply to God's involvement with the whole historical process, not to any specific work of the church. The affirmation that mission was God's came to mean that it was not ours! Such distorted theology virtually excluded evangelism, and quite rightly therefore came under sustained criticism.

In spite of such misuse, however, the expression can be retained as expressing a major and vital biblical truth (as the title *The Mission of God* is intended to reaffirm). The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal-orientated. The opening account of creation portrays God working toward a goal, completing it with satisfaction and resting, content with the result. And from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham. In the wake of Genesis 3—11 this is good news indeed for humanity—such that Paul can describe this text as "the gospel in advance" (Gal 3:8). From that point on, the mission of God could be summed up in the words "God is working his purpose out / as year succeeds to year," and as generations come and go.[18]

The Bible presents itself to us fundamentally as a narrative, a historical narrative at one level, but a grand metanarrative at another.

- It begins with the God of purpose in creation
- moves on to the conflict and problem generated by human rebellion against that purpose
- spends most of its narrative journey in the story of God's redemptive pur-

[16]L. A. Hoedemaker, "The People of God and the Ends of the Earth," in *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction,* ed. A Camps, L. A. Hoedemaker and M. R. Spindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 163. Hoedemaker provides an interesting and critical survey of the history of *missio Dei,* and its weaknesses.

[17]Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission,* ed. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (1958; reprint, St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1965).

[18]Arthur Campbell Aigner, "God Is Working His Purpose Out" (1894).

poses being worked out on the stage of human history

- finishes beyond the horizon of its own history with the eschatological hope of a new creation

This has often been presented as a four-point narrative*: creation, fall, redemption,* and *future hope.* This whole worldview is predicated on teleological monotheism: that is, the affirmation that there is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that this God has a goal, a purpose, a mission that will ultimately be accomplished by the power of God's Word and for the glory of God's name. This is the mission of the biblical God.

It is of course not just a single narrative, like a river with only one channel. It is rather a complex mixture of all kinds of smaller narratives, many of them rather self-contained, with all kinds of other material embedded within them—more like a great delta. But there is clearly a direction, a flow, that can be described in the terms I have layed out. Richard Bauckham says it is important 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." It is not an aggressively totalizing story that suppresses all others—the accusation that postmodernism makes against all metanarratives. Rather,

> these inescapable features of the actual narrative form of Scripture surely have a message in themselves: that the particular has its own integrity that should not be suppressed for the sake of a too readily comprehensible universal. The Bible does, in some sense, tell an overall story that encompasses all its other contents, but this story is not a sort of straitjacket that reduces all else to a narrowly defined uniformity. It is a story that is hospitable to considerable diversity and to tensions, challenges and even seeming contradictions of its own claims. [19]

To read the whole Bible in the light of this great overarching perspective of the mission of God, then, is to read with the grain of this whole collection of texts that constitute our canon of Scripture. In my view this is the key assumption of a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. It is nothing more than to accept that the biblical worldview locates us in the midst of a narrative of the universe behind which stands the mission of the living God.

> Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,
> As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
> World without end, Amen.

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[19]Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), pp. 92-94.

This is not just a liturgically conventional way to end prayers and canticles. It is a missional perspective on history past, present and future, and one day it will be the song of the whole creation.

Humanity with a mission. From this theocentric starting point, *God with a mission,* we can in summary see the other major dimensions of mission flowing through the Bible, which we will explore further in the rest of this book. In its opening chapters we meet *humanity with a mission* on the planet that had been purposefully prepared for their arrival—the mandate to fill the earth, subdue it and to rule over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28). This delegated authority within the created order is moderated by the parallel commands in the complementary account, "to work . . . and to take care of" the Garden (Gen 2:15). The care and keeping of creation is our human mission. The human race exists on the planet with a purpose that flows from the creative purpose of God himself. Out of this understanding of our humanity (which is also teleological, like our doctrine of God) flows our ecological responsibility, our economic activity involving work, productivity, exchange and trade, and the whole cultural mandate. To be human is to have a purposeful role in God's creation. We will return to these themes in chapters twelve and thirteen.

Israel with a mission. Then, against the background of human sin and rebellion in Genesis 3—11, we encounter *Israel with a mission,* beginning with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. Israel came into existence as a people with a mission entrusted to them from God for the sake of God's wider purpose of blessing the nations. Israel's election was not a rejection of other nations but was explicitly for the sake of all nations. This universality of God's purpose, that nevertheless embraces the particularity of God's chosen means, is a recurrent theme and a constant theological challenge (to Israel as much as to contemporary theologians). With Israel, of course, we embark on the longest part of the biblical journey, and the great themes of election, redemption, covenant, worship, ethics, and eschatology all await our missiological reflection. They will fill part three of this book.

Jesus with a mission. Into the midst of this people—saturated with Scriptures, sustained by memory and hope, waiting for God—steps *Jesus with a mission.* Jesus did not just arrive. He had a very clear conviction that he was sent. The voice of his Father at his baptism combined the identity of the Servant figure in Isaiah (echoing the phraseology of Is 42:1), and that of the Davidic messianic king (echoing the affirmation of Ps 2:7). Both of these dimensions of his identity and role were energized with a sense of mission. The mission of the Servant was both to restore Israel to YHWH and also to be the agent of God's salvation reaching to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6). The mission of the Davidic messianic king

was both to rule over a redeemed Israel, according to the agenda of many prophetic texts, and also to receive the nations and the ends of the earth as his heritage (Ps 2:8).

Jesus' sense of mission—the aims, motivation and self-understanding behind his recorded words and actions—has been a matter of intense scholarly discussion. What seems very clear is that Jesus built his own agenda on what he perceived to be the agenda of his Father. Jesus' will was to do his Father's will, so he said. God's mission determined his mission. In Jesus the radically theocentric nature of biblical mission is most clearly focused and modeled. In the obedience of Jesus, even to death, the mission of God reached its climax. For "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19).

The church with a mission. Finally, the biblical narrative introduces us to ourselves as *the church with a mission*. As Luke 24:45-47 indicates, Jesus entrusted to the church a mission that is directly rooted in his own identity, passion and victory as the crucified and risen Messiah. Jesus immediately followed this text with the words, "You are witnesses"—a mandate repeated in Acts 1:8, "You will be my witnesses." It is almost certain that Luke intends us to hear in this an echo of the same words spoken by YHWH to Israel in Isaiah 43:10-12.

> "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,
> "and my servant whom I have chosen,
> so that you may know and believe me,
> and understand that I am he.
> Before me no god was formed,
> nor will there be one after me.
> I, even I, am the LORD,
> and apart from me there is no savior.
> I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
> I, and not some foreign god among you.
> You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God."

Israel knew the identity of the true and living God, YHWH; therefore they were entrusted with bearing witness to that in a world of nations and their gods. The disciples now know the true identity of the crucified and risen Jesus; therefore they are entrusted with bearing witness to that to the ends of the earth.[20] The church's mission flows from the identity of God and his Christ. When you

[20]It is probable that in its immediate context (Lk 24 and Acts 1), the language of "witness" refers primarily to the role of the apostles as direct eyewitnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ, and especially of his resurrection. However, since that specific and unique apostolic witness forms the basis of the continuing witness by all believers to the gospel of Christ, it is not inappropriate to discern the wider and long-term missional implications of the term here.

know who God is, when you know who Jesus is, witnessing mission is the unavoidable outcome.

Paul goes further and identifies his own mission with the international mission of the Servant of the Lord. Quoting Isaiah 49:6 in Acts 13:47 he declares quite bluntly:

> This is what the Lord has commanded *us:*
>
> "I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
> that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." (emphasis added)

This is a missiological hermeneutic of the Old Testament if ever there was one. As the NIV footnote shows, Paul has no problem applying the singular "you" (which was spoken to the Servant) to the plural "us" (himself and his small band of church planters). So again, the mission of the church flows from the mission of God and the fulfillment of God's mandate.

Mission, then, in biblical terms, while it inescapably involves us in planning and action, is not *primarily* a matter of our activity or our initiative. Mission, from the point of view of our human endeavor, means the committed *participation* of God's people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation. The mission is God's. The marvel is that God invites us to join in.

> Mission arises from the heart of God himself and is communicated from his heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God.[21]

Putting these perspectives together, a missional hermeneutic means that we seek to read any part of the Bible in the light of

- God's purpose for his whole creation, including the redemption of humanity and the creation of the new heavens and new earth
- God's purpose for human life in general on the planet and of all the Bible teaches about human culture, relationships, ethics and behavior
- God's historical election of Israel, their identity and role in relation to the nations, and the demands he made on their worship, social ethics, and total value system
- the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, his cross and resurrection
- God's calling of the church, the community of believing Jews and Gentiles who constitute the extended people of the Abraham covenant, to be the

[21]John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 335.

agent of God's blessing to the nations in the name and for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ

A Hermeneutical Map

The validity of any framework for hermeneutics or for biblical theology must always be open to critique, and the one who offers it must be humble enough to recognize that ultimately it is the text that must govern the framework, and not the other way round. This is the challenge of Anthony Billington's question: "Does this or that particular framework *do justice* to the thrust of the text in its biblical-theological context? Or does it *distort* the text?"[22] I repeat my agreement with Billington's concern. All I would ask is that the missional framework I propose in this volume be evaluated for its heuristic fruitfulness. Does it in fact do justice to the overall thrust of the biblical canon? Does it illuminate and clarify? Does it offer a way of articulating the coherence of the Bible's overarching message? Only the reader can answer, if he or she can stay with me through the long biblical journey ahead.

There is, however, a sense in which *any* framework necessarily distorts the text to some degree. The only way not to distort the biblical text is simply to reproduce it as it is. Any attempt to summarize or provide some system or pattern for grasping it, or some structure to organize its content, cannot but distort the givenness of the original reality—the text itself.

In this respect, a hermeneutical framework for reading the Bible (like any scheme of biblical theology) functions rather like a map. As cartographers will agree, every existing map and any possible map is a distortion to some degree of the reality it portrays. Maps of the world are the clearest examples of this. There is simply no way of producing on a two-dimensional plane the reality of the three-dimensional globe without distortion. So all world maps ("projections") compromise on where the unavoidable distortion occurs—the shape of the continents, their relative area, the lines of latitude and longitude, distortion at the poles or compass orientation, and so forth. The choice will depend on who the map is for and what it is intended primarily to show.

With larger scale maps of smaller areas (e.g., for walking in the countryside or finding one's way in a city), the question becomes one of what is included or excluded from the symbolic representation that all maps are. Not every feature of the real landscape can be on a map, so the question again is, What purpose is the map intended to serve? What are the most significant features that

[22]Anthony Billington, unpublished written response to my Laing Lecture at London Bible College, October 1998.

the person using this map will need to see clearly? What can then be omitted—not because they don't exist in the geographical reality but because they are not of primary relevance to this particular way of viewing that reality? Somewhere there must be maps of the sewers of London. They are doubtless of crucial importance to local city engineers, but they are of limited value to tourists. It is more than they need to know. The map of the London Underground is a classic and brilliant representation of that transport system, invaluable to tourists while underground but of very limited value on the streets above. It distorts and omits in order to simplify and clarify. And indeed that iconic diagram provides a much more comprehensible framework for understanding London by Tube (subway) than any map would do that showed all the Underground lines in their actual twists and turns, distances and directions. Furthermore, we all know that the Underground map is a distortion of reality for the purpose for which it was designed—to enable us to navigate the actual reality of the Tubes simply and safely. The degree of distortion is justified and accepted for what it is, and we do not accuse it of falsehood or of misleading the public. Distortion, in this context, is not at all the same thing as inaccuracy. In its own terms the London Underground map is a comprehensively accurate document.

I think there is some value in this analogy of comparing hermeneutical frameworks to maps. The given reality is the whole text of the Bible itself. No framework can give account of every detail, just as no map can represent every tiny feature of a landscape. But like a map, a hermeneutical framework can provide a way of seeing the whole terrain, a way of navigating one's way through it, a way of observing what is most significant, a way of approaching the task of actually encountering the reality itself (just as a map tells you what to expect when you are actually in the terrain it portrays).

A missional hermeneutic such as I have sketched seems to me to fulfill some of these mapping requirements. It does not claim to explain every feature of the vast terrain of the Bible, nor to foreclose in advance the exegesis of any specific text. But when you encounter on your hike some feature of the landscape that is not marked on your map, you do not deny its existence because it has no place on your map. Nor do you necessarily blame the map for choosing not to include it. Rather, the map enables you to set that feature in its proper geographical location and relationship with the other features around you.

The more I have attempted to use (or stimulate others to use) a missional map of the Bible, orientated fundamentally to the mission of God, the more it seems that not only do the major features of the landscape stand out clearly but also other less well-trodden paths and less scenic scholarly tourist attractions turn out to have surprising and fruitful connections with the main panorama.

PART II THE GOD OF MISSION

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. (Deut 10:14)

O LORD, God of Israel, . . . you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. (2 Kings 19:15)

I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me? (Jer 32:27)

The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
he is called the God of all the earth. (Is 54:5)

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 18:25)

For God is the King of all the earth. (Ps 47:7)

Wherever you look in the canon of the Old Testament, there are texts to be found that declare that YHWH, the Lord God of Israel, is the one and only universal God of all the earth or of all the nations or of all humanity. YHWH made all, owns all, rules all. The sample texts above are drawn from the Torah, narratives, Prophets and Psalms. The uniqueness and universality of YHWH are foundational axioms of Old Testament faith, which in turn are foundational to New Testament Christian faith, worship and mission. In the three chapters of part two we will survey some dimensions of that axiomatic monotheistic worldview as they affect our understanding of biblical mission.

If YHWH alone is the one true living God who made himself known in Israel and who wills to be known to the ends of the earth, then our mission can contemplate no lesser goal (chap. 3).

If Jesus of Nazareth is the one who embodies the identity and mission of YHWH, the one to whom the Lord God has given all authority in heaven and earth, the one to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he

is Lord, then the Christ-centered heartbeat and witness of all our mission is non-negotiable (chap. 4).

If the conflict between the living God and his Christ, on the one hand, and all that human and satanic effort erects in the form of other gods and idols, on the other, constitutes the great cosmic drama of the biblical narrative, then our mission must involve us in that conflict with idolatry, assured of the ultimate victory of God over all that opposes his universal reign (chap. 5).

Before we embark on these tasks, however, two further introductory points need to be made.

First, questions surrounding the *historical origins* of monotheism in ancient Israel are not our concern here. This has been the focus of very extensive scholarly and critical inquiry for many years, and it is beyond the scope of this work to survey it in depth. What we have in our hands as the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament as Christian readers, is of course just that—the Scriptures as preserved and handed down within the canonical tradition by those who represented the "official" faith of Israel, as it were, but it is difficult to have access to the religious minds of average Israelites at any given point in Israel's Old Testament history, except to say that much confusion seems to have resided there. Even within the pages of Israel's Scriptures we are explicitly informed of the long struggle through many generations of Israel between popular religion and advocates of the monotheistic covenant faith portrayed in the documents. There were those who understood this covenant faith to demand the worship of YHWH alone and there were those who saw fit, for many reasons, to worship other gods instead of (or more probably often as well as) YHWH. Such archaeological evidence as we have appears to confirm the impression we get from prophets like Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel that there was a confusion of popular polytheistic cults being practiced on the soil of Israel (including cults of female deities, such as Asherah).[1]

Historians of the religion of Israel offer us various reconstructions of the stages by which it is assumed Israel became truly monotheistic. It seems clear that from a very early stage Israel had a conviction that to be Israelite required an exclusive attachment to YHWH as their God. This is sometimes called "mono-Yahwism." Whether this commitment to YHWH originally included the conviction that YHWH was the *only* deity in reality (as distinct from the only deity Israel was to worship), and if not, by what stages and by what date such

[1]The most recent survey of this archaeological material and its bearing on Israelite religion and Old Testament monotheism is provided by William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

a conviction eventually took hold, is a matter of continued and inconclusive debate. [2]

However, it seems to me that the extent to which affirmations of *YHWH's uniqueness and universality* penetrated all the genres of Israel's texts allows room for believing that there was a radically monotheistic core to Israel's faith from a very early period, however much it was obscured and compromised in popular religious practice.[3]

Second, however, we have to ask, What does *monotheism* mean in this context? If we bring to our investigation a predefined assumption about monotheism in abstract philosophical terms and then measure Israel against our definition, we will get a rather reduced perspective on Israel's monotheism. In fact, as Nathan MacDonald and Richard Bauckham have shown, the captivity of the Western theological academy in general to Enlightenment categories as the framework for defining monotheism has led on the one hand to serious misunderstanding of the core claims of Israel regarding YHWH and, on the other hand, to speculative reconstructions of the evolution of monotheism in Israel which are intrinsically unverifiable and incompatible with the witness of the biblical text itself.[4]

If, instead, we ask what the people of *Israel* meant when they said such things as "YHWH is God and there is no other," then we may come to an understanding of monotheism more in line with Israel's own dynamic faith. That is, we should seek to understand Israel's religious and theological world from within, rather than squeezing it through the sieve of our categories.

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[2]There is an enormous quantity of scholarly study of the question of monotheism in the religion of Israel and the theology of the Old Testament, which we cannot engage with here. A recent study that provides a comprehensive survey and bibliography of the range of scholarship on the matter is, Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel,* JSOT Supplement Series 241 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). A shorter but very perceptive assessment of the topic (including a critique of Gnuse) is provided by Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 187-232.

[3]Peter Machinist surveyed some 433 texts affirming different elements of the distinctiveness of Israel's faith—particularly those affirming the uniqueness of Israel's God—and comments on the striking fact that they are found in all the genres and at every stage of the Old Testament literature: "The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East,* ed. F. E. Greenspan (New York: New York University Press, 1991), pp. 420-42. A similar point is made by Ronald E. Clements, "Monotheism and the Canonical Process," *Theology* 87 (1984): 336-44.

[4]Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism"* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). See also, Nathan MacDonald, "Whose Monotheism? Which Rationality?" in *The Old Testament in Its World,* ed. Robert P. Gordon and Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 45-67. Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism."

Or if we ask, What did Israel mean by "*knowing* the LORD," we will open up a rich vein of biblical monotheistic teaching. This wonderfully flexible term has several significant dimensions. YHWH presents himself as the God who wills to be known. This self-communicating drive is involved in everything God does in creation, revelation, salvation and judgment. Human beings therefore are summoned to know YHWH as God, on the clear assumption that they *can* know him and that God wills that they *should* know him. Those who stand in elect and covenant relationship with God are entrusted with this knowledge and must live accordingly, but ultimately all humanity will know YHWH to be the true God one way or another. Accordingly, making God known is part of the mission of those who are called to participate in the mission of the God who wills to be known. *"Knowing YHWH,"* then, is among those dynamic Old Testament expressions by which an Israelite might have expressed what we would call monotheism. So it is that voyage of discovery on which we now embark. How did Israel come to know YHWH as God alone? How did they envisage others coming to the same knowledge?

Our pathway through these three chapters then, will be as follows. In chapter three we will note how Israel came to know the uniqueness of YHWH through their experience of God's redemptive grace, especially in the key events of the exodus and the return from exile. But then we will also note the converse—how Israel and other nations came to know YHWH through exposure to God's judgment. Then in chapter four, moving on from the Old Testament, we will see how the New Testament fills out the knowledge of God by recognizing his identity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Christ. After that, we will draw the threads of those two chapters together and ask why biblical monotheism is missional, or to put it another way in line with the purpose of this book, how a missional hermeneutic illumines our reading of these great biblical monotheistic affirmations regarding YHWH and Jesus Christ. We cannot leave our survey of monotheism and mission, however, without attention to its dark side—the conflict with gods and idols. So in chapter five we will analyze what the Old Testament has to say about this phenomenon, tackling in the process what seem to me to be some rather superficial and patronizing misunderstandings of its polemic. Finally we will reflect on how Christian mission should address the continuing reality of idolatry, drawing on the nuanced tactics that we find in the mission practice and writings of the apostle Paul.

3

The Living God Makes Himself Known in Israel

It is something of a truism that in the Bible God is known through what God does and says. So the combination of the mighty acts of God and the words through which those acts were anticipated, explained and celebrated form the twin core of so much of the Old Testament literature. Two mighty acts in particular, at either end of Israel Old Testament history, are recorded as occasions par excellence when Israel came to know their God—the exodus and the return from exile. In both cases we will consider some of the key truths that Israel associated with these events and how they relate to the uniqueness and universality of YHWH. This in turn shapes and informs our understanding of this dimension of God's mission—his will to be known for who he is.

Knowing God Through the Experience of God's Grace

The exodus. The exodus stands in the Hebrew Scriptures as the great defining demonstration of YHWH's power, love, faithfulness and liberating intervention on behalf of his people. It was thus a major act of self-revelation by God, and also a massive learning experience for Israel. Indeed, even before it happened, the prophetic word of God through Moses in anticipation of it emphasizes this as part of its purpose.

YHWH wills to be known. Exodus 5:22—6:8 is a pivotal text in the developing story. Since Moses' arrival in Egypt and his demands on Pharaoh to grant freedom to the Hebrew slaves, things have gone from bad to worse (Ex 5:1-14). As the oppression becomes more severe, the leaders complain to Moses, and Moses in turn complains to God. He accuses God of failing to deliver on his rhetoric of salvation at the burning bush (Ex 5:15-23). In response God offers a

renewed clarification of his identity (Ex 6:2-3) and a concise but comprehensive summary of his redemptive intentions (Ex 6:6-8). Exodus 6:6-8 is God's mission statement in relation to this whole narrative.

On the warranty of his own name and character ("I am the LORD" is repeated at the beginning and end, vv. 6, 8), God promises to do three things for Israel:

- to liberate them from the Egyptian yoke
- to enter into a mutual covenant relationship with them
- to bring them into the land promised to their forefathers

The only thing that Israel will do in the whole scenario is that they will come to *know YHWH* conclusively as God through these events: "Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians" (Ex 6:7). The following months and years would see Israel on a steep learning curve, but by the end of it their worldview would be changed forever. They would know who was truly God in Egypt (and everywhere else).

So the anticipated outcome of the exodus was that Israel should know YHWH as God and should also know some fundamental truths about his character and power. This indeed is how Deuteronomy looks back on the great events of that generation. Those events constituted an unprecedented and unparalleled revelation of the identity and uniqueness of the Lord, the God of Israel. And they had been planned for exactly that purpose.

> Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any other god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?
>
> *You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; beside him there is no other.* (Deut 4:32-35 [repeated in 36-39], emphasis added)

What then did Israel come to know about YHWH through the exodus? Three lessons stand out for attention, two drawn from Exodus 15: (1) that YHWH is *incomparable* and (2) that he is *sovereign;* and one drawn from Deuteronomy 4: that YHWH is *unique*.

The Song of Moses (Ex 15:1-18), which is acknowledged by most scholars to be among the earliest of the poetic texts in the Old Testament, celebrates two ringing conclusions that could be drawn from what God had done for Israel in bringing them out of Egypt and safely across the sea to freedom.

YHWH is incomparable. This is the thrust of the rhetorical question, "Who is like you?" which surfaces here and echoes in other texts.

> Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?
> Who is like you—
> majestic in holiness,
> awesome in glory,
> working wonders? (Ex 15:11)

YHWH had proved himself superior to "all the gods of Egypt" (Ex 12:12) in the massive demonstration of power that occupies the previous eight chapters of Exodus. Whatever may or may not have been believed about YHWH in relation to what we call monotheism—that is, whether this is a claim for YHWH's sole deity—is not the concern here. All that matters is that Israel's God is clearly the most powerful God around. YHWH is beyond comparison when it comes to a conflict of wills and power. Whoever or whatever the gods of Egypt may be (and the narrator does not even trouble to name them, any more than he names the Pharaoh who claimed to be one of them), the God of Israel is more than a match for all of them.

Similar rhetoric is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to express wonder and admiration for YHWH as the God without equal. The affirmation that there is no god like YHWH ("none like him" or "none like you") declares him to be beyond comparison:

- in keeping promises and fulfilling his word (2 Sam 7:22)
- in power and wisdom, especially as seen in creation (Jer 10:6-7, 11-12)
- in the heavenly assembly (Ps 89:6-8)
- in ruling over the nations (Jer 49:19; 50:44)
- in pardoning sin and forgiving transgression (Mic 7:18)
- in saving power on behalf of his people (Is 64:4)

And because there is none like YHWH, all nations will eventually come and worship *him* as the only true God (Ps 86:8-9). This is the missional dimension of this great truth, which we will pick up and expand in chapters fourteen and fifteen.

So an important truth that Israel came to know about YHWH through the exodus is that he is incomparably greater than other gods. This is affirmed with such superlative intensity that it is tantamount to the more truly monotheistic claim. That is to say, the simple reason why YHWH is incomparable is that there is nothing in reality to compare him with. YHWH stands in a class of his own.

YHWH is King. The climax of the Song of Moses is the triumphant acclamation: "The LORD will reign for ever and ever" (Ex 15:18). The form of the Hebrew verb is imperfect; it has the flexibility of meaning "he has now demonstrated that he is king, he is now reigning, and he will go on reigning forever."[1] This is the first significant time the kingdom of God is mentioned in the Bible, and it comes in the specific context of YHWH's victory over those who have oppressed his people and refused to know him (Ex 5:2). So there is a confrontational, polemical dimension to this affirmation of YHWH as king. Because *YHWH* is king, *other* kings (Egyptian or Canaanite) tremble.

In this Exodus text the kingship of YHWH is set in the context of the historical crossing of the sea and defeat of Pharaoh's army. But the Hebrew poetic imagery draws on mythic traditions of the ancient Near East and particularly from Canaanite epics of El and Baal. At Ugarit, Baal was praised as "our king" and "Lord of Earth." He achieved this position after great victories over the primordial chaos represented by the great god Yamm (Sea). Then, having defeated Sea, Baal sits enthroned above it, on the sacred mountain from where he exercises his "eternal kingdom." Such motifs as the defeat of the sea, command of the winds, crushing of the sea dragon (Rahab), being enthroned over the deep (or the flood) and reigning from the holy mountain are drawn from the world of Canaanite mythology.[2] But they are also found within the Old Testament (as here in Ex 15), as a way of expressing and celebrating the reign of *YHWH* as king. Clear echoes of this Canaanite mythology are to be found, for example, in Psalm 29:10; 74:12-14; 89:9-10; 93:3-4; 104:3-9; Habakkuk 3:3-15; and Isaiah 51:9-16. The use of this Canaanite imagery does not mean, of course, that the Old Testament *endorsed* the myths of El and Baal. On the contrary, the faith of Israel subordinated any affirmations about these gods to the reign of YHWH. The Old Testament took over the language of Baal's kingship for the purpose of countering it by ascribing all rule in heaven and on earth to YHWH alone.

And furthermore, while using such mythic imagery, the Old Testament earthed the reign of YHWH fully in actual history. Using such imagery was a way of affirming that events which had taken place on the plane of human history bore a significance that was cosmic and revelatory. In this historical sequence of events, Israel must now recognize truth about their God, YHWH. And that truth is that the enemies of YHWH (whether human or claimed deities) are no match

[1]John Durham translates the line, "Yahweh reigns forever and without interruption," in *Exodus,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), pp. 201-2.

[2]See, e.g., John Day, "Asherah," "Baal (Deity)," and "Canaan, Religion of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:483-87, 545-49, 831-37; and N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

for his victorious kingship. "*The* LORD is king," sings Moses, with the unspoken but clear implication, "*and not Pharaoh*, or any other of the claimed gods of Egypt or of Canaan."[3]

The nature of YHWH's kingship, however—that is, the way YHWH actually functions as king— is unexpected. He exercises his kingship on behalf of the weak and oppressed. This is implied already in the Song of Moses at the Sea; what is being celebrated is precisely the liberation of an ethnic minority community who had been undergoing economic exploitation, political oppression and eventually a state-sponsored campaign of terrorizing genocide. But into the empire of Pharaoh steps the reign of YHWH, the God who hears the cry of the oppressed, the God who hears, sees, remembers and is concerned (Ex 2:23-25).

Yet again Deuteronomy provides commentary on the events we are considering. Deuteronomy 10:14-19 paradoxically puts YHWH's universal *reign* right beside YHWH's highly localized *compassion*. The passage is structured like a hymn and takes the form of two main panels with three verses in each. The first verse of each panel (vv. 14, 17) is a *doxology*. The second (vv. 15, 18) is a contrasting *surprise*. And the third (vv. 16, 19) is the practical and ethical *response* required of Israel to the affirmations just made (see table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Deuteronomy 10:14-19

14 To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.	**Hymn/Doxology**	**17** For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.
15 Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today.	**Surprise**	**18** He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing.
16 Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.	**Response**	**19** And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

[3]The idea of YHWH's world dominion over all nations and gods will be discussed further in chap. 14.

The two opening doxologies make a remarkable double claim: YHWH is the God who *owns* the universe (for it belongs to him in its entirety, v. 14), and YHWH is the God who *rules* the universe (for all other powers and authorities are subject to him, v. 17). Elsewhere God's claim of universal *ownership* is based on the right of creation (e.g., Ps 24:1-2; 89:11-12; 95:3-5). Similarly, his claim to universal *sovereignty* is grounded in his power as Creator (Ps 33:6-11; 95:3; Is 40:21-26). But the startling claim in Deuteronomy 10 is, first, that this God who rules over the entire universe has chosen Israel of all people as his covenant partner (v. 15), and second, that the power of this God over all other forms of power and authority, human or cosmic ("gods and lords") is exercised on behalf of the weakest and most marginalized in society—widow, orphan and alien (v. 18). Indeed, the balance between verses 15 and 18 implies that when God saved *Israel* from their suffering as aliens in Egypt, when he fed *them* and clothed *them* in the wilderness, God was simply acting in character—doing for Israel what he typically does for others. That is what YHWH does for aliens generically. That is the kind of God he is. YHWH is the God who loves to love, and especially to love the needy and the alien. Since the Israelites were in that needy condition in Egypt, they became the objects of his compassionate justice. YHWH, whom Israel now knows to be *king,* is the King who reigns in compassion and justice. For indeed: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne / love and faithfulness go before you" (Ps 89:14).[4]

YHWH is unique. Turning again to our Deuteronomic commentary on the exodus and Sinai events in Deuteronomy 4:32-39, what was Israel expected to deduce from their experience of God's grace in redemption (the exodus, vv. 34, 37) and in revelation (Sinai, vv. 33, 36)? The bottom line of Moses' argument is that "the LORD is God . . . in heaven above and on the earth below. *There is no other*" (vv. 35, 39, emphasis added).

The language of there being "no other" god than YHWH is found in a number of other texts that should be brought alongside this one.

> There is no one holy like the LORD;
> there is no one besides you;
> there is no Rock like our God. (1 Sam 2:2)

> So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. (1 Kings 8:60)

[4]On the widespread expectation throughout the ancient Near East that gods and kings should be agents of justice, see the comprehensive study of Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

> Then you will know that I am in Israel,
> that I am the LORD your God,
> and that there is no other. (Joel 2:27)

> I am the LORD, and there is no other;
> apart from me there is no God. (Is 45:5; cf. 6, 18)

There are scholars who question whether (with the exception of the Isaiah text) a fully monotheistic claim is being made in such passages. Some argue that such language still falls in the category of mono-Yahwism—that is, all these texts imply is that YHWH and "no other" is to be the only God worshiped *by Israel*. Whether or not the other gods of other nations have any real existence is not at issue and is not being denied in such texts, it is claimed. Indeed the assumption in such texts (according to these scholars) is that other gods *do* exist, but none of them has any claim on Israel's worship or allegiance.

However, this seems to me a very a priori assumption, which is virtually impossible to refute. For it seems that whatever an Israelite were to claim about the uniqueness of YHWH, it could be understood by the determined reader in that reductionist way. But suppose an Israelite truly wanted to make the ontological claim that YHWH was indeed the sole universal deity, what more could he or she say than Deuteronomy 4:39? Nathan MacDonald is right to say that Deuteronomy is not dealing with Enlightenment categories or definitions of deity in the abstract. But Deuteronomy does put the whole universe before our eyes ("in heaven above and on earth below") and then affirms that wherever you look, YHWH is God and "there is no other." Where else was there to be god? The implication, which the Isaiah text makes explicit ("apart from me there is no god"), seems virtually built in to the other affirmations. Even if not expressed in so many words, it is a conclusion not far from the surface.

Having made that point, however, we do need to acknowledge that the Old Testament often speaks of other gods in a way that seems to imply some kind of existence—even if it is not be compared to the categorically distinct reality of YHWH as "the God." We will return to this tension in chapter five on YHWH and the gods and idols of the nations. But for the moment I would agree with the carefully articulated argument of Richard Bauckham, who uses the phrase "YHWH's transcendent uniqueness," and defines it as follows:

> The essential element in what I have called Jewish monotheism, the element that makes it a kind of monotheism, is not the denial of the existence of other "gods," but an understanding of the uniqueness of YHWH that puts him in a class of his own, a wholly different class from any other heavenly or supernatural beings, even if these are called "gods." I call this YHWH's transcendent uniqueness (Mere

> "uniqueness" can be what distinguishes one member of a class from other members of it. By "transcendent uniqueness" I mean a form of uniqueness that puts YHWH in a class of his own). Especially important for identifying this transcendent uniqueness are statements that distinguish YHWH by means of a unique relationship to the whole of reality: YHWH alone is Creator of all things, whereas all other things are created by him; and YHWH alone is the sovereign Lord of all things, whereas all other things serve or are subject to his universal lordship.[5]

This way of understanding the uniqueness of YHWH converges with the above point on his incomparability. The reason why there is no other god *like* YHWH is because there is no other god, period. YHWH is "*the* God"—*hā ʾĕlōhîm*. As Bauckham points out, the use of the definitive article in this way effectively puts YHWH into a class of his own.

> What Israel is able to recognize about YHWH, from his acts for Israel, that distinguishes YHWH from the gods of the nations is that he is "the God" or "the god of gods." This means primarily that he has unrivaled power throughout the cosmos. The earth, the heavens and the heaven of heavens belong to him (Deut. 10:14). By contrast, the gods of the nations are impotent nonentities, who cannot protect and deliver even their own peoples . . . (see especially Deut. 32:37-39).[6]

This reinforces the view that those texts which speak of YHWH as being incomparable imply more than just mono-Yahwism (that YHWH is the only God for Israel). To see that they mean more than just limited or relative mono-Yahwism, we should notice that some of them significantly combine the phraseology of *incomparability* (none *like* him) with that of transcendent *uniqueness* (no *other* god). Examples of this combination include:

> There is no one like you, and there is no God but you. (2 Sam 7:22)
>
> Among the gods there is none like you. / . . . You alone are God. (Ps 86:8, 10)
>
> I am God, and there is no other;
> I am God, and there is none like me. (Is 46:9)
>
> O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below. . . .
>
> So that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. (1 Kings 8:23, 60).

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[5]Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 211.
[6]Ibid., p. 196.

On this last text, Bauckham comments:

> [It] can surely not mean that all the peoples of the earth will know that YHWH is the only god *for Israel.* What they will recognize is that YHWH alone is "the God." They need not deny that there are other *gods,* but they will recognize the uniqueness of YHWH as the only one who can be called "*the God.*" It is in this category that "there is no other."[7]

The return from exile. We will think later about the lessons Israel learned about God from the experience of being *sent* into exile, when we consider how they shared with other nations in knowing God through exposure to his judgment. At the point, however, when the prophetic word assured them of God's gracious intention to bring an end to the exile and *restore* them to their own land and to renewed covenant relationship with himself, there was another huge burst of learning to be done. And at each point, something more is being affirmed about the uniqueness and universality of YHWH. Here again, then, we have a section of Israel's history and Scripture that speaks directly to our theme. For if God has the mission of bringing salvation to the nations and re-creation to the whole earth, then he needs to be capable of accomplishing such a mammoth agenda. The confidence of the great exilic prophets is that he will not be found wanting in any aspect of his promises. The following great affirmations flow mainly from the book of Isaiah, along with some of the visions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

YHWH is sovereign over history. The older idea within Old Testament scholarship that Israel was unique among all the nations of the ancient Near East in an unparalleled belief that YHWH their God was active in history has been shown to be false. Other nations did make similar claims for their gods, albeit not with the sustained intensity and scope of the claim made in Israel for YHWH.[8] Getting involved in the affairs of their own nations, especially through prospering their military efforts, is what gods were for. The question however is not which nation believed their god had some control over historical events? But rather, which nation was right? Or rather, of which god was the claim (to be in control of history) vindicated and valid?

What is remarkable about the repeated claim made in Israel's prophetic texts

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[7]Ibid., p. 195.

[8]The classic work on this topic is still Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient near East and in Israel* (Lund: Gleerup, 1967). More recently, see also Daniel I. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient near Eastern National Theology,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 2000).

at the time of the exile is not just the vehemence and insistence with which it is made. (Israel's rhetoric about the sovereignty of YHWH over events far outstrips any of the extant texts we possess about the claims made on behalf of the gods of other nations at the time.) What is remarkable is, first, the fact that such claims were made at all, given the circumstances. For a great imperial power to claim that its gods were in control of events would seem natural enough. For one of the defeated little nations—scarcely a nation at all any longer—to claim the same for its own deity would seem absurdly arrogant. Surely these people are living in delusion, in pathetic denial of the reality that has dashed them down and will soon delete them and their little god from the annals of history altogether.

Yet the prophetic texts that spoke into the captivity of the Judean exiles dared to call the other nations and their gods into court, to challenge them to a grand contest to see which of their gods really was in control of history—and which one could therefore legitimately claim to be the true God.

> Bring in your idols to tell us
> what is going to happen.
> Tell us what the former things were,
> So that we may consider them
> and know their final outcome.
> Or declare to us the things to come,
> tell us what the future holds,
> so that we may know you are gods. (Is 41:22-23)
>
> I am God, and there is no other;
> I am God, and there is none like me.
> I make known the end from the beginning,
> From ancient times, what is still to come.
> I say: My purpose will stand,
> And I will do all that I please. (Is 46:9-10)

A second remarkable feature of the claims made on behalf of Israel's God, however, is that YHWH controls the whole history of *all* nations, not just the affairs of *his own* covenant people. On the whole, other nations in the ancient Near East were content to affirm their gods' involvement in events that either extended their own power or that defended the national territory or city. It is rare to find any reference to other ancient Near Eastern gods claiming to get involved in the history, politics or fortunes of third parties, and when they do, it is usually through the agency of their own nation. Yet precisely this is claimed for YHWH. Not only does he intervene in the fortunes of nations who do not wor-

ship him, he is perfectly able to do so with or without the direct agency of his own covenant people and independently of their particular interests. In exilic prophecies he can use Babylon as the agent of his judgment on Israel, but he can also use Cyrus as his agent against Babylon—and in the same breath claim that all Cyrus's victories over other nations are attributable to YHWH's sovereignty also (Is 41:2-4, 25; 44:28—45:6). These are astonishing claims.

They are also unprecedented and unparalleled claims. Simon Sherwin studies this feature of the Old Testament's claim for YHWH in detailed comparison with the kinds of claim made by contemporary nations for their gods and finds it quite distinctive. He surveys material from a wide range of ancient Near Eastern cultures over a wide span of history. Significantly, he argues that this feature of Israelite polemic is most likely linked to Israel's monotheistic worldview. Sherwin points out that most of the claims of ancient Near Eastern gods were concerned with territorial gains or losses. It was common enough for other nations to claim that it was their own national god who had obtained territory for them, in the distant or recent past. The actions of these national gods was entirely focused on the fortunes of the nation that worshiped them.

> However, the claims of Yahweh go beyond this. He claims to be able to appoint kings in other countries; he can use nations not his own to punish others; he is even able to take the real superpowers of the day, use them for his own purposes and then dispose of them. On a positive note he is also able to bring deliverance to nations that are not his. This is remarkable given the size of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and their insignificant position on the political world stage and the fact that even the superpowers of Assyria and Babylon stop short of such claims. The explanation may well lie in the monotheistic outlook of the final form of the Hebrew Bible. If Yahweh is the only God, the creator of the ends of the earth, the "Most High" who "rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:17, 32) or, to quote Jehoshaphat, "You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations" (2 Chr. 20:6), then it is well within his jurisdiction to use whom he pleases to accomplish his purposes.[9]

YHWH exercises sovereignty through his word. The power of the word of God was already an established part of Israel's faith. Not only in Genesis 1 but also in the worship of Israel the link was made between the word of the Lord and the creation of the cosmos.

> By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,
> Their starry host by the breath of his mouth. . . .

[9]Simon Sherwin, " 'I Am Against You': Yahweh's Judgment on the Nations and Its Ancient Near Eastern Context," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003): 160.

For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm. (Ps 33:6, 9)

The same psalm moves from the sovereignty of the word of God in creation to its governing role in history.

The LORD foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
But the plans of the LORD stand firm for ever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations. (Ps 33:10-11)

This article of faith is raised to new prominence, however, by the exile. And in that context the potency of God's word is highlighted all the more vividly by the impotence of God's people. If there ever had been any idea that YHWH accomplished his purpose and thus demonstrated his incomparable sovereignty through the agency of Israel's military victories (which in some situations had been true, as, e.g., the song of Deborah celebrated in Judg 5), that option was manifestly not available for the God of a struggling community of war captives. In any case, Israel was in exile not because YHWH was incapable of defeating his enemies but because he had used Babylon as the agent of his judgment on Israel. His sovereignty had been exercised through military victory, paradoxically achieved against his own people. Would he now prove his sovereignty (and deity) by reversing the polarity and raising up the Israelites again to military victory over Babylon? Precisely not. YHWH's superiority over the nations and their gods would be demonstrated not on the battlefield but in the law court, not by weapons but by his word.

At this point we need to be careful about the implications we might draw from this. The shift from coercive force was not an admission of YHWH's impotence—as though he had no other option. It was not as if YHWH had now been militarily defeated and so had to resort to other means of imposing his will. Westermann's comment at this point is dangerously open to such misunderstanding: "Since Israel had ceased to be an independent state, her God could not now prove his superiority to the gods of Babylon by means of victory over her foes. So Deutero-Isaiah shifts the arena of decision from the battlefield to the law court."[10]

Israel had not been an independent state at the time of the exodus either, yet God decisively proved his superiority to the gods of Egypt by a victory routinely described as having been achieved by "his mighty hand and outstretched arm." God could exercise coercive power without human agency if he chose to. So Westermann's immediately following comment is more acceptable.

[10]Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40—66,* trans. D. M. H. Stalker (London: SCM Press, 1969), p. 15.

> It [the shift from battlefield to law court] does not, however, in any way imply a severance of the link between God's action and history; it only means that the hitherto accepted proof of a god's divinity, his power to win military victory for his own people, was replaced by another, the dependable and unremitting continuity between what a god says and what he does.[11]

It was the word of God that counted. Even the great display of God's power in the exodus had been accompanied by the predictive and interpretative word of God through Moses, and was quickly followed by the massive "word event" of God's revelation at Sinai. And, more sharply pertinent to the exiles, even the military victory of Nebuchadnezzar and destruction of Jerusalem was proof of the truth and power of the word of God spoken through the prophets beforehand. Millard Lind comments:

> Deutero-Isaiah is saying that the politics which tries to control by coercion is ineffective in terms of the continuity of community and that the "gods" of such communities are therefore not really divine. The only effective politics of the continuity of community is based not on military might but rather upon the continuity of the creative word and deed of Yahweh, *who therefore is alone God*.[12]

So through the great demonstrations of God's redemptive grace, the exodus and the return from exile, Israel learned that part of the uniqueness of YHWH their God was that he exercised his sovereignty over the ebb and flow of international history *through his word*. The claim of Isaiah 40—55 is that this capacity established not just his superiority over all other claimed gods but in fact his sole deity.

YHWH acts for the sake of his name. Two questions introduce our point in this section. First, what motivated YHWH to bring his people back from exile in a second great act of redemption? Second, why did it matter that he should, in the process, demonstrate his claim to deity by his sovereign control of history through his word? The answer to both questions lies in God's concern for his own name.

To the first question—the motivation for God's action: YHWH would deliver his people from their captivity because the only alternative (to allow the status quo to continue) threatened permanent damage to his own reputation as God. There was an ancient principle at work here, first articulated in Moses' intercession with God on behalf of sinful Israel at the time of the golden calf apostasy and again in the midst of the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. On both of those oc-

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[11]Ibid.

[12]Millar C. Lind, "Monotheism, Power and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 435, emphasis added.

casions Moses appealed against God's declared intention to destroy the people of Israel. And he based his appeal (among other things) on the grounds that God had a reputation to think of. What would the nations (especially the Egyptians in that context) think of YHWH as God if he first delivered Israel from Egypt and then destroyed them in the wilderness (Ex 32:12; Num 14:13-16; Deut 9:28)? They would think YHWH was either incompetent or malicious. Is that the kind of reputation YHWH wanted? The name (reputation) of YHWH among the nations was at stake in what God did *against* his own people, just as it was involved in all that he did *for* them.

It was Ezekiel, however, who took this principle to its most radically theocentric extreme. In Ezekiel 36:16-38, Ezekiel argues, first, that the exile had been a moral necessity as an act of God's punishment on a nation that had proved incorrigibly and unrepentantly wicked for generations. The result of the exile, however, had been that the name of YHWH was being "profaned" among the nations. That means, the name "YHWH" was being treated as the common or ordinary name of just another defeated god among the long list of gods whose nations had been conquered and exiled by Babylon. This was a situation YHWH could not tolerate as a permanent state of affairs. Indeed, in Ezekiel's graphic phrase, YHWH "had pity for [his] holy name"—such was the disgrace it was suffering (Ezek 36:21 KJV). So, yes, YHWH would act again to deliver his people, but the primary motivation, in Ezekiel's uncompromising theocentricity, would be to salvage YHWH's own name from the gutter of profanity among the nations—not (in the first place) for Israel's own sake.

> It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. (Ezek 36:22-23)

Isaiah also captures the fact that YHWH will act in forgiveness and restoration primarily for his own sake (cf. Is 43:25), but he lays greater emphasis on the final part of Ezekiel's concern, namely, that YHWH wills to be known among the nations for who he truly is. This brings us to the second of our two questions: Why did it matter that God's sovereignty through his word should be clearly—even forensically—demonstrated? Repeatedly, Isaiah declares that the purpose of this demonstration is that the name of the true and living God should be universally known. The prophecies in relation to Cyrus are explicit on this point, and gloriously ironic. To prove the power of his word YHWH, through his

prophet, names Cyrus in advance and predicts his initial rise to power, his eventual defeat of Babylon, and his instrumentality in the release of the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The irony lies in the fact that although *Cyrus* is named (Is 44:28; 45:1), his name will not be known to the ends of the earth. That honor will go to YHWH, whom Cyrus does not even acknowledge.

> I am the LORD, and there is no other;
> apart from me there is no God.
> I will strengthen *you* [Cyrus],
> though you have not acknowledged me,
> so that from the rising of the sun
> to the place of its setting
> men may know that there is none besides *me*. (Is 45:5-6, emphasis added)

So from the prophet's perspective, the historical events that were being set in motion through the word of God would demonstrate the transcendent uniqueness of YHWH as God, and would eventually result in the universal acknowledgement of that fact. The proof of his words is confirmed by the fact that today not many people other than ancient historians know the name of sixth-century B.C. Cyrus whereas there are millions who worship the Lord God of Israel through his Son Jesus Christ.

YHWH's sovereignty extends over all creation. A theme that had not been lacking in Israel's preexilic faith and worship comes to particular prominence around the time of the exile and return, namely, YHWH's sovereignty over all of creation as the only living God. Psalm 33 directly links this affirmation to YHWH's governance of international history. Jeremiah explicitly contrasts YHWH's power as Creator with the impotence and transience of other gods.

> The LORD is the true God;
> he is the living God, the eternal King. . . .
>
> "These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens."
>
> But God made the earth by his power. (Jer 10:10-12)

But it is the prophecies in the book of Isaiah, given to renew the faith of the exiles, that make the most of this sovereignty of YHWH as Creator—precisely because the exiles needed to regain their confidence in the universality of YHWH. Far from being defeated, far from being confined to either his own people or his own land, he was still Lord of the whole cosmos as much as he had ever been.

This truth had a double edge, however. On the one hand it meant that Israel could believe, against all the appearances of their present circumstances, that

when YHWH would act to bring about their return from exile, nothing could stand in his way, for everything was under his sovereign control—the earth, the heavens, the great deep, even the stars (and their alleged astral divinity). This was Israel's ancient creation faith, so let them be reminded of it: "Do you not know? / Have you not heard?" (Is 40:21-26).

On the other hand, it meant that if Israel should be inclined to protest at the means by which God would bring about their deliverance (i.e., through a pagan king who did not even know YHWH, yet is provocatively described as YHWH's "shepherd" and "anointed"), they would do well to remember who it was they presumed to argue with—the Creator of the universe.

> Concerning things to come, do you question me . . . ?
> It is I who made the earth
> and created mankind upon it.
> My own hands stretched out the heavens;
> I marshaled their starry hosts.
> I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: . . .
> He will rebuild my city
> and set my exiles free. (Is 45:11-13)

So, the reason why God's planned action for Israel's deliverance will be spectacularly successful is that it is grounded in his universal sovereignty as Creator. And the effect of that saving action will be to demonstrate the unique identity and status of YHWH to the rest of the world. Israel would do well not to protest, for they have a role to play in that divine agenda. If Israel's ultimate mission was to be a blessing and a light to the nations, they need to cooperate with God's means of executing that purpose, whether they approved of it or not.

YHWH entrusts his uniqueness and universality to the witness of his people. How will the rest of the world come to know these great truths about YHWH? This essentially missiological question receives the remarkable answer that YHWH entrusts his intention for the nations to the *witness* of his own people. Returning to the metaphor of the law court again, we are to envisage the other nations being brought in to present whatever they can in support of the claimed reality and power of their gods. There are criteria, however, for what constitutes admissible evidence. It will not be a case of which of the gods claims the greatest military victories but which of them had the ability to predict and interpret history, in the way that YHWH had done through his prophets. Can the nations bear witness to anything like that for their gods? Israel has abundant witness to bear on precisely those points on behalf of YHWH. So it will be through Israel's witness that YHWH's powers of revelation and salvation, and ul-

timately YHWH's identity as sole God, will be posted in the public arena of world history.

> All the nations gather together
> and the peoples assemble.
> Which of them foretold this
> and proclaimed to us the former things?
> Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,
> so that others may hear and say, "It is true."
> "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,
> "and my servant whom I have chosen,
> so that you may know and believe me
> and understand that I am he.
> Before me no god was formed,
> nor will there be one after me.
> I, even I, am the LORD,
> and apart from me there is no savior.
> I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
> I, and not some foreign god among you.
> You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God." (Is 43:9-12)

Now the primary responsibility of a witness is to tell what they *know*. Herein, then, lies the huge responsibility of knowing *God*. This is what gives such powerful significance to the words of Moses to Israel in Deuteronomy 4:35. Pointing to all that the Israelites had witnessed of the words and works of the Lord, he draws the conclusion: "*You* were shown these things so that *you* might *know* that the LORD is God; beside him there is no other" (emphasis added).

The "You" is in an emphatic position in the sentence. An expanded paraphrase of the text might render it: "*You,* Israel, know that YHWH is '*the* God.'[13] Other nations do not yet share the privilege of this knowledge, precisely because they have not experienced what you have just done, through the exodus and Sinai encounters. So this unique knowledge of this unique God is now your unique stewardship."

Israel then, alone among the nations, is the people who *do know* YHWH. Other nations as yet do not. Idolatry is, among other things, a form of ignorance (Is 44:18). The nations do not know YHWH's laws, which he had given only to Israel (Ps 147:19-20). Israel, therefore, as the people who do know the true identity of the living God, through his acts of self-revelation and redemption, must

[13]The precise phrase is literally "YHWH, he is the God." This is exactly the same formula as the acclamation of the people after Elijah's fiery demonstration that YHWH, not Baal, was the God who could answer by fire (1 Kings 18:39).

bear witness to that knowledge among the nations. It is not necessary to read a missionary mandate into this role within the Old Testament itself, in the sense of Israelites being physically sent out to travel to the nations to bear witness to this knowledge. But the concept is clearly there: this knowledge *is to be* proclaimed to the nations, just as much as the good news of its liberation was to be proclaimed to Jerusalem. Or to be more precise, the good news of what God had done for Jerusalem would constitute part of the good news that would go also to the nations, when "all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" (Is 52:10; cf. Jer 31:10). *How* this would happen is never clearly articulated in the Old Testament, but *that* it would happen is unequivocal.[14] It is celebrated in advance in worship and prophecy.

> Sing to the LORD a new song;
> sing to the LORD all the earth.
> Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
> proclaim his salvation day after day.
> Declare his glory among the nations,
> his marvelous deeds among all peoples. (Ps 96:1-3)

> Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
> make known among the nations what he has done,
> and proclaim that his name is exalted.
> Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things;
> let this be known to all the world. (Is 12:4-5)

It is clear then, in concluding this section, that through their major historical experiences of YHWH's grace in redemption and deliverance, Israel believed that they had come to know him as the one and only true and living God. In his transcendent uniqueness there was no other god like YHWH. Furthermore, they had a sense of stewardship of this knowledge since it was God's purpose that ultimately all nations would come to know the name, the glory, the salvation and the mighty acts of YHWH and worship him alone as God.

Knowing God Through Exposure to His Judgment

We have seen, then, that Israel's primary source of knowing YHWH to be the one true and living God *(the God)* was their experience of his grace in historical acts of deliverance. But those acts of deliverance for *Israel* meant judgment on their

[14]The single exception to the lack of "how" is Is 66:19, which does predict a sending out to the nations to proclaim the glory of YHWH among them. The whole context shows this to be an eschatological expectation. Fuller discussion of the nations in Old Testament theology is found in chap. 14.

oppressors. These enemies too would come to know God, but they would know him as the God of justice who could not be resisted with impunity. And when Israel themselves by persistent rebellion put themselves into the company of the enemies of YHWH, they too would know him in that way. So we turn again to the exodus and the exile, but this time from the perspective of Egypt and Israel respectively as the objects of God's judgment and as the subjects of some sharp learning. After that, we will look further forward, with Ezekiel, to the final judgment of the enemies of God and God's people, and summarize what will then and thereby be known about God.

Egypt. The exodus narrative has as its major plot, of course, the deliverance of Israel from their oppression under the Pharaoh. It also has as its major subplot, however, the massive power encounter between YHWH, God of Israel, and Pharaoh, king (and god) of Egypt—and all the other gods of the Egyptians. The trigger for this subplot is the fateful refusal of Pharaoh to recognize YHWH as having any jurisdiction in his territory. To Moses' request that Israel should be released in order to worship their God, YHWH, Pharaoh answers: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go" (Ex 5:2).[15]

This challenge introduces the vivid narrative of the plagues on Egypt, during which we hear the recurring motif, "Then you will know . . . ," throughout Exodus 7—14. YHWH, the God who would make himself known to the Israelites by delivering them, would simultaneously make himself known to Pharaoh by overthrowing his oppression.

What then did Pharaoh come to know about YHWH? If we run through the sequence of relevant passages in Exodus we discover numerous items on the curriculum of Pharaoh's education, arranged, probably in an ascending order in table 3.2. It was a steep learning curve, which eventually ended in destruction. More happily, though this was God's final word for that particular Pharaoh and the forces he ranged against YHWH and his people, it was not God's final word for Egypt. The great empire of the Nile does come in for even more words of judgment as Israel's history unfolded,[16] but Isaiah 19:19-25, in one of the most remarkable pieces of prophetic vision in the Old Testament, puts Egypt on to

[15]An interesting implication of Pharaoh's words, which is not particularly taken up in this narrative but is certainly a major point with Deuteronomy and the prophets, is the link between knowing YHWH as God and obeying him. Pharaoh feels no obligation to obey because he claims not to know. Conversely, to know YHWH is to be committed to obeying him (cf. Deut 4:39-40). Jeremiah actually defines the knowledge of God in that way, using Josiah as his example (Jer 22:16), and Hosea can sum up Israel's disobedience to so many of God's commandments in the stark verdict, "There is no . . . knowledge of God in the land" (Hos 4:1 KJV).

[16]See, e.g., Is 19:1-15; Jer 46; Ezek 29—32.

Table 3.2. The Curriculum of Pharaoh's Education

Scripture	Comment
The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD. (Ex 7:5, 17)	YHWH, the God whom Pharaoh had refused to acknowledge, truly is God. The Egyptians will be forced to recognize at the very least that there is such a god as this one who declares, "I am YHWH."
So that you may know there is no one like the LORD our God. (Ex 8:10)	YHWH, the God of the despised Hebrew slaves, has no rivals. There is none like him. The incomparability of YHWH was something Israel would learn also.
So that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land. (Ex 8:22)	YHWH is God in Egypt—regardless of Pharaoh's own claim to be god—and whatever the status of all the other gods of Egypt, YHWH was not subject to Egypt's visa controls or confined to the territory where the Israelites lived.
So that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. (Ex 9:14)	YHWH is without peer, not just in Egypt but throughout the earth.[a]
I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. (Ex 9:16)	YHWH, far from being subject to Pharaoh's whim and favor, is the one who is using Pharaoh for his own universal purpose—the extension of his name in all the earth.[b]
I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. (Ex 12:12)	YHWH is the judge of all the supposed gods of Egypt, though they are gods of its great imperial power and glory.
The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen. (Ex 14:18; cf. Ex 14:4, 25)	YHWH is the God who has the power to protect his people by defeating his enemies, even without human agency.

[a]Assuming that *kōl hā'āreṣ* here probably means "all the earth," not just "all the land" (of Egypt).

[b]There is an irony here similar to the one we observed above in relation to Cyrus. God had raised up Cyrus, and even called him by name (Is 45:4), but the name that would be universally known as a result, would be the name of YHWH. Even more ironic in the exodus context is the fact that we do not for certain know the name of this Pharaoh ("Pharaoh," of course, is a title, not a personal name). Whatever conclusion we may arrive at as to the historical dating and identity of the Pharaoh of the exodus, the text itself pointedly declines to name him. The name that will be known to the world will be the name of YHWH, the name of the God this anonymous Pharaoh had refused to know. The Pharaoh whose name we can't be sure of will forever be linked with the God whose name we know for certain—the Lord, the mighty one of Israel.

the same learning curve as Israel. That is, the prophet looks forward to the day when Egypt too will come to know YHWH as Savior, defender and healer.[17]

What is unmistakeably clear is that whether we look at what Israel learned through the experience of God's grace or at what Egypt learned through exposure to God's judgment, the same *monotheizing dynamic* is evident. More than anything else this great epic of YHWH God in action demonstrated his uniqueness and universality, and was intended to do so. The statements of purpose in the exodus narrative are frequent and unmistakeable: "then you will know," "so that you will know." Clearly, the motivation from God's point of view was not only the liberation of his enslaved people but this driving divine will to be known to all nations for who and what he truly is. The mission of God to be known is what drives this whole narrative.

Israel in exile. The exile raised huge questions about God in the mind of Israel and the prophets of that era. Israel was defeated, God's city destroyed and God's people driven out of their land. Did this mean that YHWH had met his match in the gods of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon? Was YHWH himself also defeated? In the macro-cultural worldview of the ancient Near East, the assumption (shared by Israel) was that events on earth mirrored events in the heavenly realm. The fate of human armies reflected the cosmic battles of the gods. Hitherto, Israel believed, YHWH, the God of Israel, was without serious rival. Even if gods of the other nations had any reality at all (and in some sense they must have, inasmuch as the affairs of nations were bound up with their gods), those gods had never succeeded in challenging the power of YHWH and his covenant commitment to Israel and their land.

So how then was the shattering defeat of Israel and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar to be interpreted? Was it a delayed vindication of the arrogant claims of the Assyrian commander who, at the time of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in Hezekiah's and Isaiah's time, had boasted that YHWH would prove no more powerful than any of the other petty national gods swallowed up by mighty Assyria?

> Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, "The LORD will deliver us." Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? *How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?* (2 Kings 18:32-35, emphasis added)

[17]We will study this passage and many others with similar implications if not quite so dramatic language in chap. 14.

In spite of the Assyrian officer's boast, the Lord had summarily seen off the Assyrians. But now, just over a century later, the Babylonians had trampled Jerusalem to dust, captured the king, torched the temple and carried off the surviving population into exile. Had the enemies of YHWH triumphed at last?

Paradoxically, the prophets gave to their people (before, during and after the event itself), the explanation they were most reluctant to hear: It was not that YHWH was defeated; on the contrary, he was as much in control as ever. YHWH was still in the business of dealing with his enemies. The question now was, Who is YHWH's real enemy? Or more pointed still, *who was Israel's real enemy?* Israel by its persistent rebellion against their covenant Lord had turned YHWH into their own enemy. *"I myself am against you"!* These ominous words, words that had been spoken by God against many other nations through many a prophet, were now turned against the covenant people themselves (Ezek 5:8). So the victory of Nebuchadnezzar was not a victory *over* YHWH (though Nebuchadnezzar doubtless interpreted it thus) but a victory *of* YHWH. Nebuchadnezzar had become merely God's agent in his covenant conflict with his own people. With the Lord on their side, Jerusalem could not be destroyed. With the Lord against them, Jerusalem could not be defended. The paradoxical sovereignty of YHWH as God is affirmed throughout.

So Israel went into exile and found themselves, like the Egyptians, the Canaanites, and even more recently the Assyrians, exposed to God's judgment. Pursuing our inquiry throughout this chapter, how did this experience lead to a greater knowing of God? What did Israel learn when God treated them as an enemy? Particularly, what did their learning include in relation to the uniqueness and universality of YHWH as God? From a number of texts we may assemble the following points.

YHWH has no favorites. Israel learned that to have YHWH as their covenant partner did not mean that he was their national god who could be always counted on to be on their side, no matter what. To know that YHWH was the God of all the earth, sovereign over all the nations, meant that they must recognize that Israel's election into covenant partnership was not a matter of favoritism at all but a huge responsibility. Indeed, as Amos had pointed out more than a century before the exile, their status as God's uniquely chosen people, far from granting them any kind of immunity from God's judgment, only served to expose them all the more fully to his punishment when they failed to live out the ethical implications of that status.

> You only have I chosen
> of all the families of the earth;

Therefore I will punish you
for all your sins. (Amos 3:2)

Amos had further challenged the idea that even the exodus, considered simply as the historical act of God bringing them up out of Egypt to settle in the land of Canaan, conferred some kind of unique or favorite position for them. And again, Amos did so on the basis of YHWH's universal sovereignty over the histories of other peoples.

"Are not you Israelites
the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the LORD.
"Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,
the Philistines from Caphtor
and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7)[18]

Like so many other aspects of Israel's faith, this understanding was already articulated in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 2:10-12, 20-23 are short parenthetical sections describing YHWH's prior involvement with surrounding nations before Israel even came on the scene. Though they are almost incidental to the main narrative, they imply the same theological affirmation: YHWH, though the covenant God of Israel as his elect and redeemed people, is the universal God who has already been active in the history and movements of other nations.[19] So it is not surprising that even in a prime text in which God's particular election of Israel is highlighted, it is balanced (as if to avoid precisely any suspicion of favoritism), with the strong defining affirmation of YHWH's universality and therefore of his impartiality: "The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, *who shows no partiality*" (Deut 10:17, emphasis added).

God's impartiality in dealing with the nations, with its correlative truth that there was no favorite status for Israel, is upheld by those prophets closest to the exile. Jeremiah affirmed through the imagery of the potter that God would respond to *any* nation (including Israel) on the basis of its response to his word to them (Jer 18:1-10). Ezekiel set Jerusalem "in the midst of the nations," but only so as to show not some kind of elevation beyond punishment but rather the horrific deformity of the fact that they were behaving even worse than the nations that did not know YHWH. God was now as much against Israel as he had ever been against their enemies (Ezek 5:5-17). Knowing God through this whole

[18]See chap. 14 for more detailed discussion of this key text.

[19]Patrick Miller reflects further on the theological significance of these geographical parentheses in "God's Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomic Theology," in *Realia Dei,* ed. P. H. Williams and T. Hiebert (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 185-94.

era, then, meant learning that his universality stood above and beyond all petty national favoritism.

YHWH can use any nation as his agent of judgment. There was nothing new about this idea insofar as it related to *Israel* as the agent of God's judgment. The conquest of Canaan had been portrayed in those terms quite explicitly. When the Lord drove out the nations before Israel, Israel functioned as the agent of God's judgment on the wickedness of the Canaanites (cf. Lev 18:24-28; 20:23; Deut 9:1-6). Nor was it entirely new to interpret the oppression of Israel by her enemies as indicative of God's anger against Israel's unfaithfulness—as the whole pattern of the book of Judges shows. The prophets, however, expressed this side of the matter very forcefully. Isaiah could describe Assyria as simply a stick in the hand of YHWH, with which he would chastise Israel (Is 10:5-6). Jeremiah went further and invaded an international diplomatic conference in Jerusalem to inform the gathered ambassadors that YHWH, the God of Israel, had given all their countries into the hand of "my servant Nebuchadnezzar." This startling interpretation of contemporary international politics was founded on the equally uncompromising claim that YHWH the God of Israel had every right and authority to do this, since he was the Creator and disposer of the whole earth and its inhabitants.

> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm, I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon: I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him. (Jer 27:4-6)

Here then, the uniqueness and universality of YHWH—as Creator of the earth and Lord of history—is combined with his sovereign freedom to use any nation as agent of his purposes.[20]

YHWH's judgment is righteous and justified. It is one thing to make such affirmations. It is another to defend them before a shocked and smarting people, for whom the fall of Jerusalem proved only that YHWH was either incompetent or unfair. Ezekiel faced the first generation of exiles, fresh from the trauma of the event itself. It was their bitter complaint that if indeed these events were to be viewed as the work of YHWH, then "the way of the Lord is not just" (Ezek 18:25). God was treating them unfairly. On the contrary, argued Ezekiel, in his combination of evangelistic and pastoral rhetoric, what YHWH had done was ut-

[20]We will return to this theme also in more depth in chap. 14.

terly justified by the persistent and incorrigible rebellion of the house of Israel. Israel's flagrant sin had left God with no moral alternative but to punish them. Not only must *Israel* be made to know that YHWH had done nothing against Jerusalem "without cause" (Ezek 14:23), *the nations too* will come to know it, in order that the justice of God's ways may be known on earth (Ezek 38:23). For this was one of the essential aspects of affirming the universal rule of YHWH as sole God: namely that *justice* is the very essence of his rule and that *this applied as much to Israel as to all the nations.*

God's people, even under judgment, remain God's people for God's mission. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:1-14 began by offering them a fresh, prophetic perspective on what had happened to them. There is a significant contrast between the way the narrative, quite correctly, refers to the exiles as "the people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile" (v. 1), and the way the letter addresses them as "all those *I [YHWH]* carried into exile" (vv. 4, 7). On the plane of human history, it was perfectly true that the exiles of Judah were the victims of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial conquest. From the perspective of God's sovereignty, however, they were still a people in the hands of their God. The sword of Nebuchadnezzar was being wielded by the God of Israel. With this perspective Jeremiah urged the exiles to settle down and accept the reality of their circumstances. God had exiled them to Babylon; they had better treat it as home for the time being (vv. 5-6). They would not be home in two years (as false prophets were saying); they would be in Babylon for two generations. Babylon was not their permanent home, but it was their present home.

This, however, was far from a despairing resignation to their fate. Jeremiah goes on: "Increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jer 29:6). The echo of the Abrahamic covenant is surely not accidental. The great fear of this people, decimated by siege, famine, disease, the sword and captivity, was that they would die out altogether. What then would become of the promise of God to Abraham, so foundational to their very existence as a nation, that they would be as numerous as the sand or the stars (Gen 15:5; 22:17)? They need not fear, for God would not abandon that promise. Israel would not die out but prosper—as other prophets likewise affirmed (Is 44:1-5; 49:19-21; Ezek 36:8-12).

But if this advice to Israel (to increase in numbers) is a clear echo of the Abrahamic covenant, then so is the very next piece of instruction—which must have been startlingly unwelcome to the victims of Babylon's aggression: "And seek the shalom of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray on its behalf to YHWH, for in its shalom there will be shalom for you" (Jer 29:7, my translation).

The exiles had a task—a mission no less— even in the midst of the city of their enemies. And that task was to seek the welfare of that city and to pray for the

blessing of YHWH upon it. So they were not only to be the *beneficiaries* of God's promise to Abraham (in that they would not die out but increase), they were also to be the *agents* of God's promise to Abraham that through his descendants the nations would be blessed. The promise had said "all nations"—enemy nations not excluded. So let Israel assume the Abrahamic position in Babylon. They now found themselves right in the midst of one of those nations. Let them be a blessing there to those they live among by seeking and praying for their welfare.

There is something deeply ironic about this since of course the whole story of Israel had begun with Abraham being called *out of* the land of Babylon-Babel. It might seem that history is going into reverse, with Israel being exiled "from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jer 29:1, 4)—the opposite direction from the whole narrative of Israel thus far. But in the mysterious purpose of God, the descendants of the one called out of Babylon in order to be the fount of blessing to the nations now return to Babylon in captivity and are instructed to fulfill that promise right there. There is a typically divine irony, possibly noticed by Jesus, in this challenge to Israel to be a *blessing* to the nations by first of all *praying* for their enemies (cf. the combination of blessing and prayer in Mt 5:11, 44).

Such teaching, conveyed by Jeremiah's letter, turned victims into visionaries. Israel not only had a hope for the future (in the famous words of vv. 11-14), they also had a mission in the present. Even in Babylon they could be a community of prayer and *shalom*. As Ezekiel saw, YHWH was just as much alive and present in Babylon as in Jerusalem. His universal power and glory would be felt in judgment, but would also protect and preserve his people through judgment for the sake of God's own name, and for the fulfillment of his wider purposes among the nations.

The nations under judgment. Several of the prophets in their eschatological vision clearly anticipate some among the nations eventually turning to YHWH for salvation, coming to share in the blessing of Israel, even being included among and identified with Israel. Whether Ezekiel shared this hope is impossible to say, since he never explicitly gives voice to it. In Ezekiel's recorded sayings about the nations there is nothing to compare with the redemptive universality that we find in the book of Isaiah, for example.[21] There is, however, a tremendous universality

[21]I have discussed more fully the issue of Ezekiel's view of the future knowledge of God among the nations and what is implied by it in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 268-72, relying significantly on the fine survey of the matter in David A. Williams, " 'Then They Will Know That I Am the Lord': The Missiological Significance of Ezekiel's Concern for the Nations as Evident in the Use of the Recognition Formula" (master's diss. All Nations Christian College, 1998).

about Ezekiel's passion for the *knowledge of God*. The one thing that burns throughout his whole book is the certainty that YHWH will be known as God—by Israel *and* by the nations. The phrase "Then you [or they] will know that I am YHWH" is virtually Ezekiel's signature—occurring some eighty times in his prophetic memoir. In relation to our earlier discussion about YHWH's transcendent uniqueness, this cannot mean merely that the nations will acknowledge that there happens to be a god named YHWH among all the rest of the gods in their catalog. It means that the nations will come to the decisive and irrevocable knowledge that YHWH alone is the true and living God, unique in his identity, universal in his rule, and unchallenged in his power.

There are many examples of this affirmation throughout Ezekiel, but they come to a cacophonous climax in the grim and grizzly portrayal of the fate of Gog of Magog, in chapters 38-39. This is an apocalyptic vision, using much symbolic language and imagery, of the ultimate defeat of the enemies of God's people. It is the necessary prelude to the climactic vision of the whole book, in chapters 40-48, of God dwelling in the midst of his renewed and sanctified people. Before such unchallenged cohabitation of God and his people can happen, God's enemies must be dealt with.[22]

The two chapters, Ezekiel 38—39, tell a basic story twice over, with lurid, cartoonlike imagery that draws from various other Old Testament sources (such as the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah). A fierce enemy from the north forms a coalition of enemies; there is a massive attack on a peaceful, unsuspecting and unarmed Israel; these enemies are comprehensively defeated and destroyed by God (alone—not by human armies); the defeat of these vicious enemies will be sealed by their burial (a mammoth task in itself), and will be total, climactic, final, and forever. So the major point of these chapters is the ultimate victory of God, on behalf of his people, over all the forces that will ever oppose and seek to destroy them. As such, the vision of the defeat of Gog has had multiple proximate fulfillments in the course of history, and it is pointless to expend too much hermeneutical sweat and tears trying to make definitive identifications of the mysterious names of persons and places. In the end, says Ezekiel, God wins. In the end, God's people are kept safe. And in the end, the enemies of God and God's people will be comprehensively and conclusively defeated and destroyed.[23]

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[22]The same eschatological order of events is found in Revelation: first the enemies of God and God's people must be destroyed and only then can God dwell in the midst of his redeemed people forever.

[23]For a fuller account of my interpretation of Ezekiel 38—39, see Wright, *Message of Ezekiel,* pp. 315-26.

But what we must not miss (though sadly this is often missed by those who are so obsessed with identifying Gog or predicting end-times timetables) is the repeated refrain: "then you [or they] will know." Once again we find that the result of a great demonstration of the *power* of God is a great extension of the *knowledge* of God—by Israel, by their enemies and by all nations. The phrase occurs as the preface to the whole scenario in the final verse of the preceding chapter (Ezek 37:28). It then punctuates the narration in Ezekiel 38:16, 23; 39:6-7, 21-23, and finally draws the whole section to a close in Ezekiel 39:27-28. It is well worth reading this sequence of verses together to feel the theocentric force of what Ezekiel most wants to convey through this bizarre vision. The world must know, beyond all contradiction or confusion, the identity of the living God.

> Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them for ever. (Ezek 37:28)
>
> In days to come, O Gog, I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. (Ezek 38:16)[24]
>
> And so I will show my greatness and my holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD. (Ezek 38:23)
>
> I will send fire on Magog and on those who live in safety in the coastlands, and they will know that I am the LORD.
>
> I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the LORD am the Holy One in Israel. (Ezek 39:6-7)
>
> I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay upon them. From that day forward the house of Israel will know that I am the LORD their God. And the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sin, because they were unfaithful to me. (Ezek 39:21-23)
>
> I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. (Ezek 39:27-28)

So, then, what will Gog and all the nations come to know through this ulti-

[24]Note the same divine irony as we observed in God's address to Pharaoh and Cyrus: "I will bring you . . . so that the nations may know me." This makes it doubly regrettable that people spend so much effort trying to know who Gog might be, when the whole point is to know who God is.

mate exposure to the judgment of God? Three words dominate the curriculum: (1) the holiness, (2) the greatness and (3) the glory of YHWH.

First, the world will come to know that YHWH, far from being the name profaned as just another common deity and not a terribly important one at that, is the "Holy One in Israel," utterly distinct, transcendently unique. Second, the world will know that YHWH, far from being just one of the minor defeated deities of a region ravaged by imperial armies, is incomparably great. And third, the world will come to know the glory of YHWH—that is, that he alone is real, the God of substance and weight. Beside the holiness, greatness and glory of YHWH, all the gods and idolatries of the nations will be exposed as unholy, pathetic and empty.

The missional relevance of this great vision is surely apparent when we consider its express purpose in these terms. Like Israel in the Old Testament, the people of God throughout history have often felt mocked and attacked by the gods of the surrounding dominant cultures. There are the idols of the rich and powerful, the symbols of arrogance and greed. There are the blatant, boasting battalions of economic and military power. There is the threat and rivalry of competing faiths and ideologies. Sometimes there are the all-out assaults of social and physical persecution and attempted extermination. The language of Gog and Magog seems appropriate in such times, when God's people can feel weak, marginal, vulnerable, defenseless and exposed. But precisely for such times this vision brings the assurance of the ultimate victory of the living God, when all other gods and powers will be exposed for the empty sham they really are—though not without massive struggle. Such a vision, inasmuch as it also involves the final judgment of the wicked, brings us no pleasure, for the same prophet reminds us emphatically that God himself takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32; 33:11). But it does set all the struggles of the present within the certainty of the ultimate exposure and destruction of God's enemies, and the universal acknowledgement of the one, transcendently unique God.

Summary

Drawing together the threads of our discussion in this chapter, I have been seeking to define what monotheism means in the faith of Israel. It is the affirmation of the transcendent uniqueness and universality of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Whatever may be said about other gods (which will be explored further in chap. 5), the Lord alone is "*the* God." The Lord stands in a class of his own: there is none like him; there is no other anywhere in the cosmos. Summarizing

the knowledge of the Lord gained through his acts of revelation, redemption and judgment, the affirmations in table 3.3, while not exhaustive, capture the broad outline of Old Testament monotheism.

Table 3.3. Broad Outline of Old Testament Monotheism

The Lord alone is	In relation to the heavens, the earth and all the nations:	
Creator	The Lord made them.	Ps 33:6-9; Jer 10:10-12
Owner	The Lord owns them.	Ps 24:1; 89:11; Deut 10:14
Ruler	The Lord governs them.	Ps 33:10-11; Is 40:22-24
Judge	The Lord calls all to account.	Ps 33:13-15
Revealer	The Lord speaks the truth.	Ps 33:4; 119:160; Is 45:19
Lover	The Lord loves all he has made.	Ps 145:9, 13, 17
Savior	The Lord saves all who turn to him.	Ps 36:6; Is 45:22
Leader	The Lord guides the nations.	Ps 67:4
Reconciler	The Lord will bring peace.	Ps 46:8-10

And these, as Job might have whispered, are but the edges of his ways (Job 26:14).

4

The Living God Makes Himself Known in Jesus Christ

Jesus was born among a people who believed all of the affirmations concluded in the last chapter. Jesus himself learned and loved these Scriptures and fed his soul on their truth. This was the theocentric, monotheistic worldview of first-century Jews, the assumptive bedrock of Jesus and all his first followers. It was their foundational certainty that there was one and only one living God. This God, known only by "the Name that is above every name,"[1] was acknowledged now by Israel, his covenant people. But the God of Israel was also the universal God to whom all nations, kings, and even emperors must finally submit. And yet, within the pages of the New Testament and within what would have been the normal life span of Jesus himself (but for his crucifixion), we find the name of Jesus set alongside "the Name"—the name of Israel's God. And this is so, not just in one or two marginal or late texts but in a systematic and clearly intentional way that seems to have originated among the followers of Jesus before the earliest New Testament documents were even penned.

The New Testament, it is sometimes said, never states in just so many words "Jesus is God." We may perhaps be grateful for this, since the word *god* in English, like the word *theos* in Greek, is really far too vague and ambiguous to give such a sentence any kind of clarity or specificity. Many ancient Greeks or Romans, like many contemporary Hindus, would not balk at such a sentence, provided the word *god* is left undefined and anarthrous (i.e., without the exclusive definite article). What is so startling, and what we unquestionably do find in the

[1]It is not known exactly when the divine name YHWH was no longer pronounced aloud in reading. As well as the oral substitution of *ʾădōnay* (Lord) for the Tetragrammaton, the expression "the Name" was also used as a circumlocution.

New Testament, is that people who knew YHWH, the Holy One of Israel, to be *the* God and that YHWH was transcendently unique in all the rich dimensions of his scriptural identity, character and actions, constructed a careful, persistent, point-by-point identification of Jesus of Nazareth with this same YHWH.

In this chapter, then, we will examine first this startling development that presented Jesus as sharing the identity of YHWH, the God of Israel and Israel's Scriptures. Second, we will observe how certain major functions of YHWH are linked to Jesus in the New Testament. Third, we will explore the missional significance of this combination of identity and function between YHWH and Jesus. The Old Testament presented YHWH as the God who wills to be known to the ends of the earth; where does the New Testament fit Jesus into that divine mission? Or to put it in our more formal categories, what is the missiological significance of full, biblical, Christocentric monotheism?

Jesus Shares the Identity of YHWH

Prayer and confession are two of the clearest indications of any person's or any community's understanding of the content and object of their faith. And the New Testament provides us with concise examples of both reaching back to the very earliest worship of the Christian communities, back to the time before Paul wrote his letters or the traditions took written shape in the canonical Gospels. One is the ancient prayer *maranatha!* ("O Lord, come"). The other is the primal confession *Kyrios Iēsous* ("Jesus is Lord").

Maranatha. At the end of his first letter to Corinth Paul concludes with an Aramaic expression, *maranatha,* that, since he leaves it untranslated, must have been familiar even to Greek speaking Christians. The phrase must therefore have been a significant and well-established part of the worship of the original Aramaic speaking followers of Jesus long before the missionary journeys of Paul into the Gentile world of Asia Minor and Europe. It must then have traveled with him and the other early missionaries as a regular part of Christian worship even when the language was Greek.

Maranatha! Paul exclaims, writing it with his own hand and expecting his readers to understand it and echo it themselves (1 Cor 16:22).[2] It is clear that the "Lord" Paul is referring to by the Aramaic *mar* is Jesus, since the immediately following verse speaks of "the grace of the Lord Jesus." And equally clearly, the

[2]Although the phrase in Aramaic could be taken as either a confessional declaration ("the Lord has come!") or as a prayer ("Our Lord, come!"), it is widely agreed that the latter is most likely. In the immediate context (preceded by a curse and followed by a salutation), a prayer is more fitting. In its translated Greek form in Rev 22:20, it is clearly a prayer.

Aramaic expression was used by early Christian communities referred to Jesus. But it is also the case that the Aramaic *mar (marah, maran)* was used among Aramaic speaking Jews as a term for God—that is, for YHWH, God of Israel. It could also be used (and indeed still is in the Orthodox tradition) for human beings in positions of authority (just like the Greek *kyrios*), but there are plenty of occasions in Aramaic texts of the period (including the Qumran scrolls) where the term is used of God.[3] So, by directing their appeal to *mar* Jesus, the earliest Aramaic-speaking believers addressed their prayer to the only one who can legitimately be invoked in prayer—the Lord God.

The *Maranatha* invocation of 1 Corinthians 16:22, therefore, represents an old Palestinian formula of prayer, directed to the Lord Jesus. It is a plea for him to come in power and glory. Had these first believers only considered Jesus *maran,* as their rabbi, prayer would not have been directed to him. Rather, it demonstrates decisively that the early Aramaic believers . . . placed this Coming One at the center of their worship and adoration. Paul adopted this Aramaic phrase and used it, without explanation, to include in his closing remarks to the Corinthian church.[4]

Kyrios Iēsous. The second piece of early evidence for the content of the faith of the first believers is the simple affirmation, *kyrios Iēsous,* "Jesus is Lord."[5] While Paul uses the term *kyrios* 275 times, almost always with reference to Jesus, he was by no means the first to do so. As with the primitive expression *maranatha,* he inherited this designation from those who were followers of Jesus before him. Indeed he probably knew the expression and hated it in the days when he was persecuting those who dared to claim that the crucified carpenter from Nazareth was (God forbid, he thought) the Messiah and (even worse) Lord. It was Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus that made him blindingly aware that the phrase was not a heinous blasphemy but the simple truth.[6] When he uses the two-word phrase in his own writings, it is clearly already a christological formula. It needed no explanation, because it was already universally accepted as the standard and defining confession of Christian identity. It occurs in this formulaic way in Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3 and with slight expansion (to Jesus Christ) in Philippians 2:11.

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[3]See David B. Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), pp. 43-45, and bibliography there cited.

[4]Ibid, pp. 46-47.

[5]When the two words occur alone in this order, *Jesus* is the subject and *Lord* is the predicate.

[6]Cf. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 104-5, who sees a connection between the Damascus road encounter and Paul's acknowledgement of Jesus as *kyrios* in 1 Cor 9:1-2; 2 Cor 4:5. Luke also, who doubtless owed his account to Paul's own memoirs, emphasizes this factor in Acts 9:5, 17.

We saw that the evidence that Aramaic *mar* was used for God is clear and convincing. In the case of *kyrios,* it is overwhelming. The word could, of course, be used as an honorific title for human beings (just as *lord* can be in English). But by far the most significant use of the term, in relation to its application to Jesus in the New Testament, is its use by those who had translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek long before Christ. In the collection of those translations we now know as the Septuagint, the word *kyrios* is used virtually as the standard technical term to translate the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. They did not attempt to transliterate the Hebrew form but chose to replicate in Greek the already-established Hebrew oral tradition of reading in the word *ʾădōnay* (Lord) when YHWH occurred in the text. This latter word they rendered *ho kyrios,* "the Lord." It is used as the Greek rendering for the name of the God of Israel more than 1,600 times in the Septuagint.

Any Greek-speaking Jew of the first century would have been entirely familiar with this usage. So to the extent that he or she would have read the Scriptures in Greek, it was second nature to read *ho kyrios* and think "the Name," YHWH. It is altogether remarkable then that even before Paul's letters (i.e., within the first two decades after the resurrection) the term was being applied to Jesus. And applied not merely as a term of honor for a respected human being (as it might understandably have been), but with the fully freighted theological significance of its application to YHWH in Old Testament Scriptures. We know this from Philippians 2:6-11, which many scholars think may have been a pre-Pauline Christian hymn quoted here by Paul for its support of the point he is making in context. Not only does this passage celebrate the "super-exaltation" of Jesus (language that refers to his resurrection and ascension, elsewhere closely linked as proof of his lordship [cf. Acts 2:32-36; Rom 14:9]), not only does it say that God has given to Jesus "the name above every name" (which can mean only one name—YHWH), it clinches its argument by applying to Jesus one of the most monotheistic texts in the Old Testament about YHWH:

> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
> in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
> to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:10-11)

This is a partial quotation from Isaiah 45:22-23 of words that were originally spoken by YHWH about himself. And in that context the point of the words was to underline YHWH's uniqueness as God and his unique ability to save.

There is no God apart from me
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none but me.
Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.
They will say of me, "In the LORD alone
are righteousness [salvation] and strength. (Is 45:21-24)

The magnificent prophecies of Isaiah 40—55 assert again and again that YHWH is utterly unique as the only living God in his sovereign power over all nations and all history, and in his ability to save. Therefore Paul, or the composers of the early Christian hymn which he may be quoting in Philippians 2, by deliberately selecting a Scripture from such a context and applying it to Jesus, was affirming that Jesus shares the identity and uniqueness of YHWH in those same respects. So sure was this identification that he (they) did not hesitate to insert the name of Jesus where the name YHWH had occurred in the sacred text. By doing this they

- gave to Jesus a God title
- applied to Jesus a God text
- anticipated for Jesus God worship[7]

The missional implications of this opening point about Jesus should be clear. If the mission of the biblical God includes his will to make himself known in his true identity as YHWH, the living God of Israel's faith, then by identifying Jesus with YHWH, the New Testament sees Jesus as central to that self-revelatory dimension of God's mission. But there is far more to this than formal identity, as we now explore.

Jesus Performs the Functions of YHWH

Paul's application of an Old Testament text about YHWH to Jesus in Philippians 2:10-11 is the most notable but far from the only example of its kind. There are

[7]I owe this triplet to John R. W. Stott and quote it from memory after many enjoyable hearings of his lecture "Jesus Is Lord: A Call to Radical Discipleship."

a considerable number of other places where Paul quotes Old Testament Scriptures in which YHWH/*ho kyrios* stood, when he (Paul) is referring to Jesus.[8] Nor is Paul the only New Testament writer to do so. The author of Hebrews, for example, launches his epistle with a whole salvo of God texts applied to Jesus. Many of these applied Scriptures are functional—that is, they speak of things that YHWH does or provides or accomplishes. By such scriptural quotation those functions are then attributed to, or closely associated with, Jesus. As with the simple expressions of identity *(maranatha, Kyrios Iēsous),* Paul did not originate this practice. Nor did the early church. It goes right back to Jesus himself. For the Gospels preserve numerous ways that Jesus in word, deed and implicit claim linked himself with the unique functions of the God of Israel.

The material we could consider under this heading is abundant, so I will attempt to organize it around certain key functions of YHWH (similar to the list that concluded the last chapter), and in each case draw exemplifying texts from the Epistles and Gospels. We will look at four key ways that the activity of YHWH is described in the Old Testament: as Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior. And in each case we will see how Jesus is described in the same way.

The point to note carefully, in view of our overall purpose in this chapter, is that all of these are functions that belonged uniquely and exclusively to YHWH in our definition of Old Testament monotheism. These are the things that defined what it meant to say that "the LORD is (the) God and there is no other." These are the attributes, accomplishments and prerogatives that put YHWH in a class of his own, that constituted his transcendent uniqueness. This is what makes it so astonishing and so profoundly significant for Christian identity and mission that the New Testament portrays Jesus and his earliest followers calmly demanding that Jesus must be viewed within the same frame of reference and with the same exclusive suite of functions and claims as YHWH himself.

From a missiological angle, if these are the prerogatives and functions that YHWH exercises in fulfillment of his mission, then it will be of critical importance to any concept of Christian mission to understand how the mission of God in Christ is exercised in these terms.

Creator. Paul had the knack of bringing the most massive theological affirmations to bear upon the most mundane practical issues. Mundane, but not minor. In Corinth the issue of whether or not Christians could eat meat that had been previously sacrificed to idols occupies Paul's pastoral and theological at-

[8]E.g., Rom 10:13 (Joel 2:32); 14:11 (= Is 45:23-24); 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17 (= Jer 9:24); 1 Cor 2:16 (= Is 40:13); 2 Tim 2:19 (= Num 16:5).

tention for three whole chapters (1 Cor 8—10). Two issues are intertwined: the status of idols (are they in any sense real?), and the state of the meat (is it somehow contaminated by having been sacrificed to an idol?). Paul tackles the first head on at the beginning of his argument (1 Cor 8:4-6), and the second toward the end (1 Cor 10:25-26, though he refers to it also in 1 Cor 8:7-8). And significantly he applies a strong creation theology to both questions.

In 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 Paul throws the full weight of the *Shema*—the great Jewish monotheistic confession—at the problem. Whatever these so-called gods and lords may be, we know that there is in reality only one God and one Lord. But rather than merely quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 in its stark Old Testament form, Paul quotes it in what was possibly already a christologically expanded form within the Christian communities. It is a remarkable battery of twenty-seven words in Greek without a single main verb, which goes literally as follows:

> For us, one God, the Father,
> from whom all things
> and we for him;
> and one Lord, Jesus Christ,
> through whom all things
> and we through him. (1 Cor 8:6, my translation)

As the NIV translation makes clear, necessarily providing some connecting verbs, this not only inserts Jesus into the "one God, one Lord" of the *Shema,* it also connects Jesus with the creating work of God the Father.

> For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Cor 8:6)

All things came from one God, the Father, and all things came through one Lord, Jesus Christ. So if Jesus is Lord of all creation, these other so-called gods and idols have no real divine existence in the universe. The christological implications for biblical monotheism of what Paul does here are well brought out by Richard Bauckham.

> The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to understand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God affirmed in the Shema'. But this is in any case clear from the fact that the term "Lord," applied here to Jesus as the "one Lord," is taken from the Shema' itself. Paul is not adding to the one God of the Shema' a "Lord" the Shema' does not mention. He is identifying Jesus as the "Lord" whom the Shema' affirms to be one. In this unprecedented reformulation of the Shema', the unique identity of the one God consists of the one

> God, the Father, and the one Lord, his Messiah (who is implicitly regarded as the Son of the Father).[9]

Moving to the other end of his argument, what about the meat? Should it be shunned as contaminated by its contact with idolatry? Matching the negative point that "an idol is nothing at all in the world" (1 Cor 8:4) comes the positive point that all created things belong to the Lord anyway. So Paul quotes another great creation text, Psalm 24:1, as authority for the basic principle of freedom to eat anything (1 Cor 10:25-26—subject, of course, to the situational qualifications that follow): "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it."

The Hebrew text, of course, made this bold affirmation about YHWH. But it is most probable that Paul applies it here to Jesus, as the Lord to whom the whole earth belongs. This is partly because of the way he has already linked Jesus to God in the expanded *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6, partly because "the Lord" in the preceding context is clearly Jesus ("the cup of the Lord; . . . the Lord's table," 1 Cor 10:20-21) and partly because Psalm 24 had already gained messianic significance with its summons to make way for the "King of glory" (vv. 7, 9, 10)—a phrase possibly echoed by Paul when he referred to Jesus as "the Lord of glory" in 1 Corinthians 2:8.

So the whole earth belongs to Jesus as Lord. The missiological, ethical and (here) practical implications of such a worldview are staggering—just as staggering as the exalted vistas of Deuteronomy 10:14, 17, that we explored in chapter three. For if the whole earth belongs to Jesus, there is no corner of the earth to which we can go in mission that does not already belong to him. There is not an inch of the planet that belongs to any other god, whatever the appearances. A Christ-centered theology of divine ownership of the whole world is a major foundation for missional theology, practice and ultimate confidence.

The summit of Paul's creational christology comes in Colossians 1:15-20—a passage of unmatched exaltation. The verses relevant at this point run:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15-17)

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[9]Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 224. The passage is also thoroughly discussed in relation to Old Testament monotheism and its christological expansion by N. T. Wright, "Monotheism, Christology and Ethics: 1 Corinthians 8," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology,* ed. N. T. Wright (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pp. 120-36.

The repeated term *ta panta,* "all things," and the way it is expanded to include all possible realms of reality makes it unmistakeably clear: Jesus Christ stands in the same relationship to creation as anything that is said of YHWH in the Old Testament. He is behind it and before it. He is the agent of its creation and the beneficiary of its existence. It belongs to him as owner by right of creation and inheritance. He is the Source and Sustainer of all that exists.

Essentially the same claims are made in Hebrews 1:2 and John 1:3.

In the other Gospels Jesus' power over the natural order compelled the disciples to ask astonished questions about his identity. "Who is this?" they gasped, "He commands even the wind and the water, and they obey him" (Lk 8:25, par.). There could really be only one answer to that question, and the Psalms had already given it (cf. Ps 65:7; 89:9; 93:3-4; 104:4, 6-9, and esp. relevant for the amazed disciples, Ps 107:23-32). But it was not only in the implied answer to such questions that Jesus' identity as being one with the Creator lay. "Heaven and earth will pass away," he said, "but my words will never pass away" (Mk 13:31, par.). To claim that his word had a status and durability greater than the whole creation was to equate it with the creative word of God himself, in what was probably a deliberate echo of the great creational affirmations of Isaiah 40 (esp. v. 8).

The New Testament, then, unequivocally puts Jesus alongside YHWH in the primary biblical activity of God—the creation of the universe. The implications are correspondingly universal.

> Of the Jewish ways of characterizing the divine uniqueness, the most unequivocal was by reference to creation. In the uniquely divine role of creating all things it was for Jewish monotheism unthinkable that any being other than God could even assist God (Is 44:24; 4 Ezra 3:4 . . .). But to Paul's unparalleled inclusion of Jesus in the Shema' he adds the equally unparalleled inclusion of Jesus in the creative activity of God. No more unequivocal way of including Jesus in the unique divine identity is conceivable, within the framework of Second Temple Jewish monotheism.[10]

Jesus then is associated with all that the Old Testament Scriptures affirm about God as Creator. Since creation forms the platform of all God's mission in history, as well as being the final eschatological beneficiary of all God's redemptive intention, the centrality of Christ in that great mission of God within and for creation is clearly focused.

Ruler. We have seen that in the Old Testament the transcendent uniqueness of YHWH is expressed, first through the affirmation that he alone is the sole cre-

[10]Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," p. 224.

ator of all that exists, and second through the equally robust affirmation that he alone is the sovereign ruler of all that happens. YHWH reigns, both as the source of all reality and as the governor of all history. As Psalm 33 expresses it, the Lord calls the world into existence through his word (vv. 6-9), rules the world according to his plans (vv. 10-11) and calls the world to account before his watching eye (vv. 13-15). And as Isaiah 40—55 proclaims, he does all these things utterly unaided and unrivalled. YHWH alone is ruler of all. Where, then, could Jesus the carpenter from Nazareth possibly fit in such a view of things?

The answer came from Jesus himself. In a bold stoke he applied to himself the words of a psalm that then went on to become the most quoted christological text in the New Testament, namely Psalm 110.

> The LORD says to my Lord:
> "Sit at my right hand
> until I make your enemies
> a footstool for your feet." (Ps 110:1)

The synoptic Gospels all record Jesus using this text twice: first as a teasing question about the identity of the Messiah (how could he be just a son of David, if David himself called him "Lord" [Mk 12:35-37, par.]), and second, at his trial in answer to the high priest's question, "Are you the Christ?" (Mk 14:61-64, par.). In the latter case, Jesus' expanded his answer with a double scriptural allusion: "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The language of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven echoes Daniel's great vision in Daniel 7:13-14 and thereby associates Jesus with the universal power and authority of the Ancient of Days. The other phrase, "sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One," clearly echoes Psalm 110 and equally clearly associates Jesus with the governing authority of YHWH. For "the right hand of God" was a powerful symbol in the faith and worship of Israel for YHWH's power in action. By his right hand YHWH:

- accomplished the work of creation (Is 48:13)
- defeated his enemies in his great act of redemption (Ex 15:6, 12)
- saves those who take refuge in him (Ps 17:7; 20:7; 60:5; 118:15-16)
- will exercise final judgment, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46).

Taking their cue from Jesus' own teaching, then, the earliest Christians used the imagery of Psalm 110:1 to describe the present "location" of the risen and ascended Jesus. Jesus was not just "absent." Jesus was now already "seated at

the right hand of God." That is to say, Jesus was already now sharing in the exercise of universal governance that belonged uniquely to YHWH. This exalted claim is found in the preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, when he links Psalm 110 to the historically witnessed fact of the resurrection of Jesus and then draws the cosmic conclusion about the lordship of Jesus (Acts 2:32-36).

For Paul, the double imagery of Psalm 110:1 (the right hand of God, enemies beneath the feet) provided the most powerful way that he could express not only the authority of the risen Christ but the ultimate source of that authority, namely, the fact that Jesus shared the identity of YHWH himself, and therefore shared in his universal rule. Paul uses this imagery a lot; for example:

- in reassuring believers with the guarantee that no other power in the universe can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:34-35)
- in seeing all God's enemies, including eventually death itself, under the feet of the reigning Christ (1 Cor 15:24-28)
- in urging Christians to live their lives under the perspective of Christ's risen and ascended position at the right hand of God (Col 3:1)
- in ringing affirmation of Christ's universal lordship (Eph 1:20-23)

All of these affirmations, of course, underlie Paul's own theology and practice of mission, for it was only out of the conviction that these claims were the sober truth about the one whom he had met on the road to Damascus that he obeyed Christ's mandate to be the apostle to the nations.

The identification of Jesus with YHWH as ruler of the universe comes to its climax (like so much else) in the Revelation. The letters from Jesus to the seven churches imply, and sometimes state, the cosmic authority of Jesus. To do this they use language and imagery to describe him that the Old Testament used for God—particularly as drawn from Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days and Ezekiel's vision of the glory of YHWH. Dispensing with such imagery, however, the letter to the church in Laodicea simply speaks directly and unequivocally of Jesus as "the ruler of God's creation" (Rev 3:14), echoing the complementary claim of Revelation 1:5 that he is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." In terms of Old Testament monotheism, both of these bald statements (ruler of creation, ruler of the nations) could only ever be made about YHWH. Yet here both statements are explicitly made about Jesus. In the later visions the Lamb that was slain stands in the center of the throne, along with the One who sits on it, such that the combined worship of the vast choir of the whole creation can sing praise simultaneously

> To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
> Be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever! (Rev 5:13)

From then on the identification of Jesus the Lamb with the sovereign God on the throne, in various aspects and functions, cascades through the book (Rev 7:10, 17; 11:15; 12:10; 15:3-4; 17:14; 21:1, 3, 13).

The New Testament, then, joins together the lordship of Jesus Christ with the sovereign government of the living God of the faith of Israel. And that was precisely the connection that Jesus makes in the premise of the Great Commission.

The psalmist's shout, "The LORD is king," is echoed and equated with the believer's confession, "Jesus is Lord."

Judge. One of the core functions of YHWH in the Old Testament, which was a dimension of his sovereign rule, was that he judges the whole earth. This conviction is found in the mouth of Abraham (Gen 18:25) and echoes through the narratives, psalms and prophets as a basic datum of Israel's faith. It is a matter of cosmic rejoicing, for the whole of creation can be summoned to

> Sing before the LORD for he comes,
> he comes to judge the earth.
> He will judge the world in righteousness
> and the peoples in his truth. (Ps 96:13)

If Jesus shares in the rule of God, being exalted to his right hand, then this must also include sharing in the delivery of God's judgment. And this indeed is what the New Testament affirms unambiguously. Paul sees it as a datum of what he called "my gospel." He takes the language of the "Day of the LORD"—which certainly included judgment as well as salvation in its broad Old Testament usage—and habitually links it with Christ. It can now be called "the day of Christ," "the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares" (Phil 2:16; Rom 2:16; cf. 2 Thess 1:5-10). Just as the Old Testament envisioned all nations being summoned before YHWH as their ultimate judge, so, says Paul, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor 5:10). By that expression he doubtless meant exactly the same as "we will all stand before the God's judgment seat" (Rom 14:10).

Characteristically, the future judgment of God is affirmed in Scripture in order to effect changed behavior in the present. Paul uses this dynamic as one of the foundations for his appeal to Gentile and Jewish background believers in Rome to accept one another.[11] In Romans 14:9-12 Paul urges the two groups to refrain from judging one another precisely because we all alike face God's judgment. But he makes this point by combining the resurrection with an Old Testament

[11]It seems to me the most likely explanation of Paul's language of "the strong" and "the weak" in Romans 14—15, that he is addressing the mutual differences of the Gentile and Jewish Christians respectively.

text anticipating the universal acceptance of the lordship of YHWH. It is Isaiah 45:23 again—the same text as quoted in Philippians 2:10-11, where we saw that the name of YHWH in the original Hebrew text has been replaced by the name of Jesus in the Christian hymn. Here, Paul leaves the original term "the Lord," but the context (including the repetition of "the Lord" in vv. 6-8) leaves no doubt that Jesus is intended as the subject of the sentence, and the object of worship and submission.

> For this very reason, Christ died and lived again so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:
>
> "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
> 'every knee will bow before me;
> every tongue will confess to God.' "
>
> So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom 14:9-12)

The attribution to Jesus of the authority to act as judge, hitherto the sole prerogative of YHWH, is also not something Paul invented. This too goes back to Jesus himself. The language of the Son of Man, in those contexts where it reflected the imagery of Daniel 7, certainly had overtones of judgment, since it is linked with the sovereign throne of the Ancient of Days. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats significantly begins with the Son of Man occupying that divine seat of judgment (Mt 25:32).

John's portrayal of Jesus stakes the claim to ultimate judgment on Jesus' repeatedly taking upon himself the divine name "I am." Salvation or judgment hangs on acknowledgement or refusal of that claim. "I told you that you will die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins (Jn 8:24, my translation).

And of course the Revelation from beginning to end portrays Christ as the Lamb of God exalted on the throne of God's judgment. And the songs of the redeemed proclaim that his position there is utterly worthy, willed by God and vindicated by his divine role in creation, redemption, and control of history.

The New Testament, then, reaffirms the final judgment of the living God of the Old Testament but sees it now embodied in the one God has appointed to that seat of final authority—Jesus Christ his Son.

The psalmist's song of joy "He comes to judge the earth" (Ps 96:13; 98:9) is echoed by Christ's own promise, "Behold, I am coming soon" (Rev 22:12).

Savior. Among the songs of the redeemed in Revelation is this great affirmation:

> Salvation belongs to our God,
> who sits on the throne,
> and to the Lamb! (Rev 7:10)

That salvation belonged to God was a core assertion of Israel's Old Testament faith. That it could be celebrated as belonging now also to Jesus Christ is typical of what we have already seen—the identification of Jesus with the great defining functions of Israel's God.

Saving is one of the most dominant activities and characteristics of YHWH in the Old Testament. Indeed it is hardly going too far to say that salvation defines this God's identity. "Our God is a God who saves" (Ps 68:20). One of the earliest celebrations of salvation coming immediately in the wake of the crossing of the sea at the exodus sings, "the LORD is my strength and my song; / he has become my salvation" (Ex 15:2). Among the oldest poetic metaphors for YHWH in early Hebrew poetry is one that describes him as "the Rock" of Israel's salvation (Deut 32:15). In the psalms YHWH is above all else the God who saves, simply because that is who he is and what he does consistently, often and best. The 136 occurrences of the root *yāšaʿ* in the Psalms account for 40 percent of all the uses of the root in the Old Testament. The Lord is the God of my salvation (Ps 88:1), the horn of my salvation (Ps 18:2), the rock of my salvation (Ps 95:1), my salvation and my honor (Ps 62:6-7), my Savior and my God (Ps 42:5-6). And not just mine, and not even just of humans, for this God saves "both man and beast" (Ps 36:6). Robert Hubbard is right: "theologically, Israelite worship and instruction supremely associated Yahweh with salvation."[12] No wonder that the prophet who sought to restore Israel's faith in their great God at the time of their lowest ebb in exile reminded them of this great heritage of worship by presenting God in the terms "I am the LORD, your God, / the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Is 43:3).

The name Jehoshua (Joshua, Jeshua, Jesus) means "Yahweh is salvation." Through the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth, God was bringing in the promised new era of salvation for Israel and for the world, because through Jesus God would deal with sin. In preparation for his coming John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and forgiveness of sin (Mt 3:6), while pointing to Jesus as the one who "takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Matthew records the angel's explanation of the name Jesus: "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Luke, however, goes the furthest in festooning the language of salvation around the arrival of Jesus. Luke uses salvation terms seven times in his first three chapters (Lk 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6). There is a particular resonance

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[12]Robert L. Hubbard, "*yāšaʿ*," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,* ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:559.

when the aged Simeon, knowing he would not die before he had seen "the Lord's Christ," held the infant Jesus in his arms (probably having asked his name from his parents) and thanked God that now "my eyes have seen your salvation"—your Jehoshua (Lk 2:30).

Salvation, in its fullest biblical sense, involves more than the forgiveness of sin—though that lies at the deepest core of it since sin is the deepest root of all the other dimensions of need and danger from which God alone can save us. But it was the claim to forgive sin that most quickly and clearly raised the question of Jesus' identity in the Gospel narrative. Combining his healing of the paralytic with a declaration that his sins were forgiven, Jesus faced the indignant question, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). Quite so. What then is to be deduced about Jesus?

Actions speak louder than words, as all the prophets knew when they engaged in prophetic sign acts. So when Jesus decided that he needed to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Mt 21), it was certainly not because he needed the rest. Having walked all the way from Galilee he could have managed the last half mile on foot. For all who had eyes to see and who knew their Scriptures, the action was a graphic acting out of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9.

> Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
> Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
> See, your king comes to you,
> righteous and having salvation,
> gentle and riding on a donkey.

The language of salvation, expressed in the familiar text, was picked up by the crowds that accompanied him. "Hosanna," they shouted, which is an urgent cry meaning, "Save us, now." And they cried it to the one they hailed as "coming in the name of the Lord." "Who is this?" asked the residents of Jerusalem. "Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee" (Mt 21:10-11), came the reply of the crowds, which was certainly true, but inadequate. For the full expectation of the Old Testament text, being acted out by this prophet on a donkey, was that the Lord himself would come to Zion, to his temple. And in the temple on the very next day, Jesus acknowledged the praise of the children in the lines of Psalm 8:2, praise that was directed to God now being directed to this one who had come in God's name.

In the rest of the New Testament the language of salvation as applied to Jesus is commonplace and well-known, but we should not fail to register the surprising nature of this, in view of the deep Old Testament roots that confined true

salvation to the God of Israel alone. It is worth noting that the word *savior* in the New Testament is applied to God eight times, to Jesus sixteen times and to nobody else at all, ever. And yet the Greek word *sōtēr* (savior) was a fairly common term in the classical world. It was applied as an honorific title both to human kings and military conquerors, and also to the great gods and heroes of mythology. But not in New Testament Christianity. "Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb" (Rev 7:10). Nobody else merits even the vocabulary.

The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, as devout scriptural believers, knew that YHWH alone is God and there is no other source of salvation among the gods or on the earth. This they knew because their Bible told them so, not least Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Yet now they were so utterly convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, their contemporary, shared the very identity of YHWH their God that they could use the same exclusive salvation language of Jesus. Peter declares that salvation is now to be found exclusively in Jesus and in no other name under heaven (Acts 4:12). This is consistent with all the preaching recorded in that book (cf. Acts 2:38; 5:31; 13:38), and it was the settled resolution of the first council of the church: "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are" (Acts 15:11). Later, another Jewish believer describes Jesus as the author or pioneer of salvation (Heb 2:10), the source of our eternal salvation (Heb 5:9), and the mediator of complete salvation for all who come to God through him (Heb 7:25). New Testament salvation is as utterly Christ-shaped as Old Testament salvation is YHWH-shaped.

Paul echoes the theme when he piles up the phrases "God our Savior" or "Christ our Savior" seven times in the tiny letter to Titus alone (or both together: "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" [Tit 2:13]). In one other text, however, he makes crystal clear his scriptural and theological foundation for this by quoting an Old Testament text concerning YHWH's salvation and applying it deliberately to Jesus.

> If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10:9, 12-13)

The Old Testament text is Joel 2:32, which promised God's deliverance to those of Israel who would turn back to their God before the great day of his judgment (quoted also by Peter in Acts 2:21). Paul not only expands the scope of the appeal to Gentiles as well as to Israel (a missiological point we will return to later) but also sees the promise as now available to all who call on the name of Jesus as Lord. In view of the immediately preceding context with its great

christological affirmation "Jesus is Lord," it is unquestionable that Paul here intends that the "Lord" in his text (which was YHWH / *kyrios*) be understood now as signifying Jesus. It was this fundamental conviction about the saving identification of Jesus with YHWH that could inspire him in a moment of instinctive evangelism to urge the Philippian jailer to "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31).

Calling on the name of the Lord is an action and a theme that also has deep Old Testament roots. It was the great heritage of Israel's worship, part of the privilege of knowing YHWH as God. By contrast, other nations could be described as "nations that do not know you, / kingdoms that do not call on your name" (Ps 79:6, my translation). So again, it is significant that Paul's use of the expression here with reference to Jesus is only one example of a usage that we find in several other places in the New Testament where believers "call on the name" of Jesus—an action from which Jews would certainly have recoiled in horror as blasphemy, if they had not been convinced that in doing so they were in effect calling on the name of the Lord himself (Acts 9:14, 21; 22:16; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Tim 2:22).

The New Testament, then, building on the massive foundations of Israel's faith in YHWH, their saving God, sees the climactic work of God's salvation in the person and work of Jesus. And since the mission of God could be summed up in that one comprehensive concept that so dominates YHWH's character and intentions in the Old Testament—salvation—the identification of Jesus with YHWH puts him right at the center of that saving mission.

The psalmist's confident trust in YHWH, "God of our salvation," is echoed and equated with Paul's joyful longing for the appearing of "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Tit 2:13).[13]

Jesus Fulfills the Mission of YHWH

Jesus then, according to the consistent witness of many strands in the New Testament documents, shares the identity of YHWH, the Lord God of Israel, and per-

[13]There is now a wealth of excellent books exploring the nature and substance of the New Testament's claims regarding the deity of Jesus Christ. As a selection see Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1998); Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Leander E. Keck, *Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000); Ben Witherington III, *The Christolology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

forms functions that were uniquely and exclusively the prerogative of YHWH in the Old Testament. These include especially God's role as Creator and owner of the universe, Ruler of history, Judge of all nations and Savior of all who turn to him. In all of these dimensions of God's identity and activity, New Testament believers saw the face of Jesus, spoke of him in exactly the same terms and worshiped him accordingly.

But so what?

Why should it matter that the monotheistic faith of Old Testament Israel is expanded and redefined in this christocentric way? If, as James sharply pointed out, monotheism per se ("you believe that there is one God") gets you no further than the trembling belief of the demons (Jas 2:19), how much further does it get you merely to add Jesus to your monotheism? Supposing the New Testament had simply stated "Jesus is God." Might James perhaps have commented on mere intellectual assent to such a proposition: "You believe that Jesus is God? Good! even the demons believe that—and shudder"? My point is that if Old Testament monotheism and the New Testament's affirmation of the deity of Christ are left as merely creedal confessions, they remain, while possibly interesting for historians of religions, as dead as faith without works, as James would say.

This is where we need once again to underline the missional thrust of our investigation, which I have recalled at various points along the way in this chapter. What is the mission of this God, about whom the Old Testament affirms such transcendent uniqueness? And in what way is the New Testament confession of Jesus connected not just to the identity and functions of the God of Israel but also to his mission?

God wills to be known through Jesus. To answer these questions, we return to the overarching theme of chapter three—namely, YHWH's driving will to be known as God by all nations to the ends of the earth. Now there are, of course, many other ways that we might express the mission of God as articulated throughout the Old Testament, and the remainder of this book will explore some of the key ones. But this is one that we have seen clearly already. Whether through the experience of God's saving grace or through exposure to God's righteous judgment, Israel came to know who the true and living God is. And by the same means, ultimately, the nations too will come to know his identity, either in repentance, salvation and worship, or in defiant wickedness and destruction. "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). Such is God's will and purpose. Such is the mission of God.

In the New Testament this divine will to be universally known is now focused on Jesus. It will be through Jesus that God will be known to the nations.

And in knowing Jesus, they will know the living God. Jesus, in other words, fulfills the mission of the God of Israel. Or to put it the other way round: the God of Israel, whose declared mission was to make himself known to the nations through Israel, now wills to be known to the nations through the Messiah, the one who embodies Israel in his own person and fulfills the mission of Israel to the nations. Thus, the fact that the New Testament so carefully details all the ways that Jesus shares the identity and functions of YHWH now comes into even sharper significance in this missional perspective. For it will be precisely in knowing Jesus as Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior that the nations will know YHWH. Jesus is not merely the agent through whom the knowledge of God is communicated (as any messenger might be). He is himself the very content of the communication. Where Jesus is preached, the very glory of God shines through.

> Unbelievers . . . cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord *[Kyrios],* and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:4-6)[14]

The gospel carries the knowledge of God among the nations. Paul understood himself to be God's apostle to the nations, entrusted with the task of taking this gospel of the knowledge of the living God to the nations that knew him not. But he clearly saw this personal mission of his as entirely dependent on the prior mission of God, that is, of God's own will to be known. It was not the case that Paul chose to have a mission to the nations on behalf of Israel's God. It was that the God of Israel chose Paul for his mission to the nations. This is how Luke records Paul's own interpretation of his commissioning in Damascus.

> Then [Ananias] said, "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard." (Acts 22:14-15)

> I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. (Acts 26:17-18)

From then on Paul felt that the gospel had a power all of its own, which

[14]It seems very possible that Paul is alluding to Ezekiel's great vision of the glory of God (Ezek 1) here, and that he may have interpreted his own encounter with the glory of the risen Christ in such terms. If so, it is even more significant that he oscillates between "glory of Christ" and "glory of God"—another example of his identification of Jesus with YHWH.

swept him along in its universal scope and spread. God willed to be known and nothing could stand in his way. Paul was only a servant of the process.

> I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness. . . . God has chosen to make known among the nations the glorious riches of this mystery, which is the Messiah among you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:25, 27, my translation).[15]

Such was the unstoppable power of the spread of the gospel, because of God's will to be known, that Paul uses some geographical hyperbole, anticipating its universal proclamation.

> All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing. (Col 1:6)
>
> This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. (Col 1:23)

Regarding this Bauckham says:

> These Pauline hyperboles are not just "rhetorical" but express the urgent dynamic of the gospel towards its universal goal and Paul's overwhelming sense of his personal vocation within that dynamic.[16]

Later in life, Paul reflected on his calling to mission, seeing it as the priestly task of making God known. It was one of the functions of the priests in Israel to be stewards of the knowledge of God (cf. Hos 4:1-6; Mal 2:7; 2 Chron 15:3). Paul by analogy sees his evangelism as a priestly duty to the nations, significantly adding that he specially made it his ambition to exercise his gospel ministry "where Christ was not known" (Rom 15:16-22; notice his quotation of the Servant passage from Is 52:15, which speaks of the knowledge of the Servant among the nations). And later still, he again links his whole ministry

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[15]In Paul's brief mention of "the mystery" in the parallel section of Ephesians, it is clear that the mystery is precisely that Jesus, as the crucified Messiah, has brought Gentiles and Jews together (Eph 3:2-13). It seems to me, therefore, that the phrase ***Christos en hymin*** refers not so much to the indwelling Christ of personal experience ("Christ within you") as to the reality that Christ is now "among you"—i.e., you Gentiles, in the same sense as the preceding ***"en tois ethnesin,"*** "among the nations."

[16]Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), p. 22. Bauckham points to other examples of this geographical hyperbole and its eschatological significance for mission (Rom 1:8; 1 Thess 1:8; 2 Cor 2:14). On the other hand, Eckhard Schnabel suggests that these phrases may actually reflect missionary reality if there were early mission ventures going on in the regions that were popularly called "the ends of the earth" by the time Paul wrote Colossians; see *Early Christian Mission,* vol 1, *Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 436-554, which provides a superbly detailed account of the perceptions of geographical reality in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture of the first century, within which the early Christian mission took place.

to God's own will to be known and longing to save.

> God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. . . . And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle . . . and a teacher of the nations in faith and truth. (1 Tim 2:3-4, 7, my translation)

In between God's will to save and Paul's role in implementing it, Paul puts yet another echo of the *Shema:* "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim 2:5-6). Thus the God Paul proclaims is the one true living and only God of Israel, but the means by which this God is now to be savingly known to all humanity is through the unique humanity and self-offering of Jesus the Messiah.

What we have here, then, is biblical monotheism and mission, combined in the person of Jesus and the proclamation of the apostle.

For John, the universal revelatory function of Jesus' identity and mission is highlighted from the very beginning, repeated at intervals through the Gospel, and climaxes in the great prayer of Jesus in John 17. "No one has ever seen God," John writes as he draws his prologue to a conclusion, "but the unique God, the one in the bosom of the Father, that one has made him known" (Jn 1:18, my translation). God makes visible God's own self through the incarnation of God the Son. So, then, to know Jesus is to know the Father (Jn 8:19; 10:38; 12:45; 14:6-11), and in knowing both stands eternal life (Jn 17:3).[17] But this knowing God through knowing Jesus is not to be confined to those who saw him in the flesh. On the contrary, that privilege was accorded to them for the purpose of making him known to the world, "to let the world know that you sent me" (Jn 17:23). So, in truly priestly fashion, Jesus dispenses the knowledge of God, first to his immediate disciples and then through them to the world.

> My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, . . . that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (Jn 17:20-21, 25-26).

God's mission to be known to the world dominates the thinking of the Son even as he engages in prayer with his Father. And the mission of the disciples, implicit in Jesus' prayer before his crucifixion (Jn 17:18), becomes explicit in

[17]The same dynamic combination of the knowledge of God through the knowledge of Jesus threads its way through 1 John as well (cf. 1 Jn 2:3-6, 23; 4:13-15; 5:20-21).

Jesus' commissioning after his resurrection: "As the Father sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21).

And so John reaches his climax with Thomas's confession of faith, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28), in which Thomas addressed to Jesus words that would only ever have dared to cross his lips in the worship of YHWH. On that basis alone, John's concluding statement of the missional purpose of his Gospel can be founded. "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

Here then we have biblical monotheism and mission from the lips of the disciple and the pen of the evangelist.

Biblical Monotheism and Mission

In the course of chapters three and four we have surveyed vast tracts of biblical monotheism. I resisted at the outset the temptation to predefine monotheism in the Enlightenment categories by which religions are classified or to engage in speculative reconstructions of the alleged evolutionary process by which Israel is deemed to have reached that predefined monotheistic conceptualization. I chose rather to ask what Israel meant when they declared that "YHWH is God and there is no other." We particularly explored the dynamic experience of "knowing God." Israel claimed this for themselves on the basis of their historical experience, and they anticipated others eventually coming to such knowledge universally. Then we observed the amazing turn by which the YHWH-centered monotheism of the Old Testament became the Jesus-centered monotheism of the New Testament. This was accomplished not only without compromising the essential marks of Israel's faith but by actually affirming and amplifying them.

The question we need to ask as we summarize and conclude these two chapters is, In what way does a missional hermeneutical perspective shed light on what we call biblical monotheism, enabling us to articulate its inner dynamic and ultimate significance? Or, perhaps in simpler terms, Why is biblical monotheism missional? Three reflections may be offered in response: first, because of God's will to be known as God; second, because of the constant struggle in which biblical monotheism has always engaged and continues to be engaged today; and third, because biblical monotheism issues supremely in worship and praise, which are profoundly missional activities, in this world at least.

Biblical mission is driven by God's will to be known as God. The theme of "knowing God" was deliberately chosen as a thread for chapters three and four because nothing seems more appropriate to this driving force of biblical

monotheism. The one living God wills to be known throughout his whole creation. The world must know its Creator. The nations must know their Ruler, Judge and Savior. This is a major subplot of the exodus narrative in the book of Exodus, but later recollections of that great event repeatedly highlight its prime purpose as making a great name for YHWH among the nations (e.g., Josh 2:10-11; 2 Sam 7:23; Ps 106:8; Is 63:12; Jer 32:20; Dan 9:15; Neh 9:10). "The exodus, then, establishes a paradigmatic link between God's particular identity as the God of Israel and God's purpose of universal self-revelation to the nations."[18] Later great acts of YHWH are recorded with the same intention: the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 4:24), David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam 17:46), God's covenant with David (2 Sam 7:26), God answering prayer in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:41-43, 60), God delivering Jerusalem from the Assyrians (2 Kings 19:19; Is 37:20), God bringing Israel back from exile (Is 45:6; Jer 33:9; Ezek 36:23). The whole history of Israel, we might say, is intended to be the shop window for the knowledge of God in all the earth. This is the reason the story is to be told from generation to generation.

> All the ends of the earth
> will remember and turn to the LORD,
> and all the families of the nations
> will bow down before him, . . .
> [because] . . .
> future generations will be told about the Lord.
> They will proclaim his righteousness
> to a people yet unborn—
> for he has done it. (Ps 22:27, 30-31).

Richard Bauckham sees this as one of the major missional trajectories of the biblical revelation. "This trajectory is fundamentally about the knowledge of who God is, YHWH's demonstration of his deity to the nations." Aware of possible contemporary objections to such a view of God, Bauckham continues:

> We may have difficulty with this picture of God desiring and achieving fame for himself, something we would regard as self-seeking vanity and ambition if it were said of a human being. But this is surely one of those human analogies which is actually appropriate uniquely to God. The good of God's human creatures requires that he be known to them as God. There is no vanity, only revelation of truth, in God's demonstrating of his deity to the nations.[19]

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[18]Bauckham, *Bible and Mission,* p. 37.
[19]Ibid.

This leads us to the first of three missiological conclusions from this point.

The good of creation depends on humanity knowing God. First, to repeat Bauckham's words: "the good of God's human creatures requires that he be known to them as God." We might add that the good of the whole creation requires that God be known and praised as its Creator. The frustration of creation in this primary role and task, on account of human sin, is one of the reasons why the whole creation looks forward eagerly to the redemption of humanity (Rom 8:19-21). But confining ourselves to the human dimension: it is crucial to emphasize the point that knowing God to be God is the supreme good and blessing for human beings made in God's image. Refusing or suppressing that knowledge lies at the root of all other kinds of sin, argues Paul in Romans 1:18-32. Conversely, knowing God in love and obedience is the source of all human well-being and good (Deut 4:39-40). Life itself, in all its fullness and eternity, lies in knowing and loving God (cf. Deut 30:19-20; Jn 17:3). For this we were created, and anything less falls short of the glory of God. "The chief end of man," as the Westminster Confession so succinctly and biblically expressed it, "is to glorify God and enjoy him forever"—which encapsulates the supreme task and blessing of what it means to know God, and thereby to be fully human. Accordingly, insofar as our missional engagement is a matter of making God known, it is by that very fact also a matter of bringing blessing and good to people, for "the LORD is good." Mission is not the imposition of yet another religious bondage upon an already overburdened humanity. It is the sharing of the liberating knowledge of the one true living God, "in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life."[20]

The good of creation comes from humanity knowing the biblical God. Second, this good comes only from the knowledge of this God—the living and personal God of biblical monotheism. Biblical mission necessarily requires biblical monotheism. It means making known the biblical revelation of the living God in all the fullness of his identity, character, functions and saving acts. It means sharing, as it were, the biography of the God of the whole Bible. The personal and ethical quality of biblical monotheism is distinctive and definitive. As we observed, merely believing in the singularity of deity—abstract monotheism—is no great achievement. Nor was such belief the limit of what Israel was to learn from, say, the experiences of exodus and Sinai. The point of these events was not so that Israel would know the arithmetic of heaven but that they would know the identity and character of the One who alone

[20]From the second collect, for peace, in "The Order for Morning Prayer," *Book of Common Prayer.*

was "the God"—YHWH (Deut 4:32-40). He is the God whom they were to know as the God of justice, compassion, holiness, truth, integrity, love, faithfulness and sovereign power. These qualities of the one God would be the stuff of their narratives, the sanction for their laws, the platform for all the moods of their worship, the burden of their prophets and the foundation for their wisdom. And this is the God who promised to make himself known to the nations, in the most monotheistic tract in the Old Testament, as the Servant whose commitment to justice, compassion, liberation and enlightenment would lead him to vicarious suffering and death (Is 42-53).[21] And in fulfillment of that, this is the God whose transcendent uniqueness took flesh and dwelled among us in the humanity of Jesus, full of grace and truth. The only kind of monotheism that is "good" for people is the knowledge of this God. That is why God wills to be known for the God he truly is.

God's will to be known is the mainspring of our mission to make him known. Third, this great biblical dynamic that God wills to be known precedes and undergirds all of the efforts of God's people in their mission of making him known. Here again we find the priority of God's mission as the source of our own. In the Old Testament we find God's own clear intention that the knowledge of YHWH as the living God should go to the nations, who indeed are portrayed as waiting eagerly for it. In the New Testament we find the mechanism of that process revealed—the apostolic witness to the gospel of Messiah Jesus and the sending of the disciples of Jesus to make disciples of the nations. So Paul could describe himself as a "teacher of the true faith to the nations" (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11, my translation). "The mission to the nations in the New Testament also is directed to their acknowledgement and worship of the true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9; Acts 17:23-29; Revelation 14:7; 15:4) even before it is directed to the salvation that accompanies this."[22]

So all our missional efforts to make God known must be set within the prior framework of God's own will to be known. We are seeking to accomplish what God himself wills to happen. This is both humbling and reassuring. It is humbling inasmuch as it reminds us that all our efforts would be in vain but for God's determination to be known. We are neither the initiators of the mission of making God known to the nations nor does it lie in our power to decide how the task will be fully accomplished or when it may be deemed to be complete. But it is also reassuring. For we know that behind all our fumbling efforts and inadequate

[21]On this point, see especially Millar C. Lind, "Monotheism, Power and Justice: A Study in Isaiah 40-55," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 432-46.
[22]Bauckham, *Bible and Mission,* p. 40.

communication stands the supreme will of the living God, reaching out in loving self-revelation, incredibly willing to open blind eyes and reveal his glory through the treasures of the gospel delivered in the clay pots of his witnesses (2 Cor 4:1-7).

Biblical monotheism involves constant christological struggle. One of the more facile a priori assertions of the evolutionary theory of human religious development is that although it might take a long time for a culture to reach the heights of monotheism, monotheism itself had such a self-evident power of conviction that people would never set off in the opposite direction by reverting to polytheistic forms of religion. Monotheism was a plateau from which no thinking person or culture could wish to descend. The alleged evolutionary process of religious maturation was not considered reversible.

But as Bauckham convincingly argues, the reason for the much more untidy account of Israel's religious history that the canonical books actually present is that biblical monotheism was not at all a self-evident vista, which, once glimpsed, could never be surrendered. It was, rather, as the Old Testament repeatedly portrays, a constant battlefield.[23]

Moving from the Old to the New Testament, we can see immediately that the same struggle surrounds the claims made for Jesus Christ. Christ-centered monotheism is no more self-evidently beyond challenge or dissent than YHWH-centered monotheism was in Israel. Nor is it any more immediately obvious to the world that Jesus alone is Lord, God and Savior, than it was to the nations around Israel that YHWH alone is the God of heaven and earth, Creator of the world and Ruler of all its nations. And yet these are precisely the truths to which Israel was called to bear witness, and which Christian mission declares to the world.

So one of the reasons why biblical monotheism is missional lies here: it is a truth to which we are constantly called to bear witness. It is a conviction that constantly engages us in the apologetic task of articulating and defending what we mean by our confession of faith in the living God of the Bible in both Testaments. As the New Testament records, from the very earliest days of the Christian faith, believers had to contend with challenges to the lordship of Christ from outside the church, and with denials or confusions concerning aspects of the person and achievement of Christ from within it. Today, as much as ever, to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is uniquely God, Lord and Savior, is to find oneself immediately engaged in missional conflict on every side.

But what does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is unique? There are those who

[23]To remind ourselves yet again, by "biblical monotheism" I mean the actual assertion in Israel of the transcendent uniqueness of YHWH, not the abstract construct of Enlightenment categories.

would argue that the language is too imprecise and open to wilfull misunderstanding or distortion. Of course Jesus is "unique," the religious pluralist may congenially agree. Every religion and every great religious leader is unique. They all provide unique insights and unique opportunities for "saving contact with the Ultimate Divine Reality" (to use pluralist language). But used in this way, to say that Jesus is unique is no more than to say that he is a unique specimen of a particular species—the species being "religious leader" or "agent of salvific contact with the divine." He is one (unique, i.e., distinctive) way among many possible ways to find whatever one means by "God." And so, as has been said, the language of the uniqueness of Jesus can be the "trojan horse of pluralism." By using it, you may be allowing a lot of unsuspected and unwelcome theological assumptions into the vocabulary by those who are happy to use the phrase, but in that relativized pluralist way.

Accordingly, it seems all the more important to have worked through in these two chapters exactly what we mean by biblical monotheism. And especially we are grateful for Bauckham's clarification of what we mean by the uniqueness of YHWH. For the Old Testament texts clearly did not mean that YHWH was one unique god among many within the species "gods." Rather, in what Bauckham called "transcendent uniqueness," YHWH stood *sui generis,* entirely in a class of his own as *the* God, the sole Creator of the universe, and Ruler, Judge and Savior of the nations. And the New Testament repeatedly makes exactly the same affirmations about Jesus of Nazareth, putting him in the same exclusively singular, transcendent framework and frequently quoting the same texts to do so.

So when we speak missiologically of the uniqueness of Christ, we are not engaged in some kind of horizontal comparison of Jesus with other great founders of religions. It is not that we line them up together and at the end of such a comparative process we come to the conclusion that, somehow, Jesus is better than all the rest, or, less competitively, that "Jesus is the one for me." Rather we are engaged vertically in tracing the scriptural roots of the identity, mission and accomplishments of Jesus deeply into the uniqueness of YHWH, the Holy One of Israel. Christocentric biblical monotheism is profoundly missional, inasmuch as it says with equal strength (because both statements ultimately amount to the same univocal claim) that YHWH is God in heaven above and the earth beneath, and there is no other; and that Jesus is Lord, and there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved.[24]

[24]I have surveyed these dimensions of the uniqueness of Jesus in the context of religious pluralism more fully in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Uniqueness of Jesus* (London and Grand Rapids: Monarch, 1997).

Biblical monotheism generates praise. I ought to conclude this chapter at the same destination as that to which biblical monotheism itself leads, doxology: the worship and praise of this great God, in and through the name of Christ.

The title of the book of Psalms in Hebrew is *tĕhillîm,* "Praises." This is so even though the largest single category of psalms are the psalms of lament. Praise in the Old Testament was not just about being happy and thankful but about acknowledging the reality of the one living God in the whole of life—including the tough times. So even in those psalms which are mostly in a troubled mode, there is a movement toward praise. Even the whole book of Psalms moves from the predominance of lament and petitionary psalms in the early sections to the almost complete dominance of praise in the final section. As Patrick Millar puts it in a warm and instructive article:

> To go through the Book of Psalms is to be led increasingly toward the praise of God as the final word. . . . That is so theologically, because in praise more than any other human act God is seen and declared to be God in all fullness and glory. That is so eschatologically, because the last word of all is the confession and praise of God by the whole creation.[25]

So there is a close link between the monotheistic dynamic of Israel's faith, and the glorious richness of Israel's worship. Since Israelites know YHWH to be "the God"— the God of such resplendent character, such robust redemptive action and such reliable faithfulness—the only right response is the outpouring of praise. And since they know YHWH to be the only God, there is a broad surge of universality coursing through Israel's worship. And this universality, in turn, inevitably implies that all nations, indeed all creation, must come to worship the living God of Israel and can be summoned to do so. And this, in a nutshell, is a missional perspective, even though there is no centrifugal missionary mandate. Miller makes the point by showing how Israel's worship combines theology and testimony, declaration and conversional anticipation.

> The praise of God in the Old Testament is always devotion that tells about God, that is theology, and proclamation that seeks to draw others into the circle of those who worship this God, that is testimony for conversion. . . . Perhaps less clear in the minds of many readers of the Old Testament is the fact that the praise of God is the most prominent and extended formulation of the universal and conversionary dimension of the theology of the Old Testament. One might even speak of a missionary aim if that did not risk distorting the material by suggesting a program

[25]Patrick D. Miller Jr., " 'Enthroned on the Praises of Israel': The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology," *Interpretation* 39 (1985): 8.

> of proselytising to bring individuals into the visible community of Israel. That is not the case. But what blossoms and flourishes in the New Testament proclamation of the Gospel to convert all persons to discipleship to Jesus Christ is anticipated in the Old Testament's proclamation of the goodness and grace of God.[26]

Ultimately, the power of this declarative praise reaches not only to the fullest horizontal extent throughout the nations but also to the fullest vertical extent to future generations. Again, without creating or conceiving a missionary mechanism to accomplish what is being declared, the extent of this vision in Israel's worship is certainly missional by implication.

> [In Israel's worship] the Lord is praised and testimony is borne, a testimony that is meant to summon all humankind to the praise of God and thus to an acknowledgement and worship of the Lord of Israel. Here one sees the political and eschatological thrust of Israel's praise in its insistence that the lordship of this God is universal in scope and should bring forth the conversion of every being to the worship of Israel's God. This call to the nations and peoples to praise the Lord is no incidental or exceptional matter. It is pervasive in the Psalms, where "all the earth" (33:8; 66:21; 96:1; 98:1; 100:1), "the earth" (97:1), "the coastlands" (97:1), "all the inhabitants of the earth (33:8), "all flesh" (145:21), "peoples" (47:2; 66:8; 67:4,5,6; 148:11; Deut. 32:43) are called to praise and bless the Lord again and again. In Deutero-Isaiah the conversionary character of these songs of praise is explicit (Is 45:22-25). [But in Psalm 22:22-31] the power of this testimony does not stop there. Beyond Israel "all the families of the nations shall worship before you" (v. 27). Yet even that does not exhaust the circle of praise, for those who have died shall praise the Lord (v. 29), as well as generations yet unborn (vs. 30-31).[27]

I hardly need add that the New Testament shares the same vision of all humanity and all creation praising God, through Jesus Christ. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the church in Europe was born through the conversionary power of praise, if one thinks of the hymn-singing Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25; cf. 1 Pet 2:9).

In his superb opening to his book *Let the Nations Be Glad,* John Piper arrestingly writes, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't."[28]

This is well said and fundamentally true, of course. Praise will be the dominant reality of the new creation, whereas, since God's mission to redeem his

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[26]Ibid., p. 9.
[27]Ibid., p. 13.
[28]John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), p. 17.

whole creation will be complete, our derivative mission within history will be at an end (though who knows what mission God may have for redeemed humanity in the new creation!). So, yes, mission exists because praise does not, for mission means bringing those who do not yet praise the living God to do so.

But in another equally biblical sense we could say that mission exists because praise does. The praise of the church is what energizes and characterizes it for mission, and also serves as the constant reminder we so much need, that all our mission flows as obedient response to and participation in the prior mission of God—just as all our praise is in response to the prior reality and action of God. Praise is the proper and primary stance or mode of existence of the created order to its Creator. So inasmuch as our mission is a part of our creaturely response to our God, praise must be its primary mode also.

We will return in chapter fourteen to the universality and missional significance of many of the psalms. But for now, it is sufficient to bring our survey in this and the previous chapter to a close with the observation that among the many models for mission that we find in the Bible (in addition to the much overused military one) is the concept of singing a new song among the nations. Mission means inviting all the peoples of the earth to hear the music of God's future and dance to it today. As Psalm 96 would remind us

- This is a new song that remixes the old words, for it celebrates the old story of what God has done for his people (Ps 96:1-3).
- It is a new song that radically displaces the old gods whose former worshipers must now bring all their worship into the courts of the Lord (Ps 96:4-9).
- It is a new song that transforms the old world into the anticipated righteousness and rejoicing of the reign of the Lord (Ps 96:10-13).

Monotheism is missional because it generates praise and also because it globalizes praise—the praise of the one true living God, known through his grace, his judgment, and above all his Messiah.

So then the missionary nature of Christian monotheism does not flow from an endemic religious imperialism or military-style triumphalism (however much it may have been infected with that virus in different eras), but from the roots of our faith in Old Testament Israel and their belief in the God, the only true and living God, whose mission of love for the world had led to the election of Israel and the sending of the church. It is this God, and no other, who so determined to bless the nations that he chose Abraham. It is only this God who so

loved the world that he sent his only Son. Only this God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And it is this God who has entrusted the mission and ministry of reconciliation to the people to whom Jesus said "you will be my witnesses… to the ends of the earth." That is the *missionary* nature of biblical monotheism.

5

The Living God Confronts Idolatry

If biblical monotheism is necessarily missional (because the one living God wills to be known and worshiped throughout his whole creation), and if biblical mission is necessarily monotheistic (because we are to call all people to and to join all creation in the praise of this one living God), then what about all the other gods that populate the pages of the Bible and surround us still today in many forms? In this chapter we will examine how the Bible handles the phenomenon of human beings worshiping many alleged deities other than the God of Israel. What exactly are they? And in chapter six we will consider a missional response to this phenomenon. What should we be doing in relation to idols and gods? It has long seemed to me that the biblical category of *idolatry* is in danger of shallow understanding and simplistic responses. Yet surely it is a fundamental, if negative, aspect of a fully biblical and missional account of biblical monotheism. And a greater understanding of it is therefore a vital part of authentic and sensitive Christian mission.

Paradoxes of the Gods

Something or nothing? A statue is real enough. A carved or molten image has three-dimensional existence in the real world. But what about the god or gods it supposedly represents? Are they real? Do they exist? Are they something or nothing? What did Israel believe about the gods in relation to their own God, YHWH? This last question has vexed the minds of Old Testament theologians for many decades. Having defined monotheism within the generic categories of human religion as the belief that only one divine entity exists, along with the consequent denial of the existence of any other deities whatsoever, the search was

on for the process by which and the time when Israel could be said to have achieved monotheism in that sense. Clearly Israelites expressed their commitment to YHWH in some very exclusive terms. But did that mean that Israelites categorically denied the *existence* of the other gods whom they were forbidden to worship?

The classic answer given within the guild of Old Testament scholarship has been the evolutionary or developmental one recently summarized, repackaged and reissued by Robert Gnuse.[1] With variations as to the precise dating of the transitions, this view reconstructs the religious history of Israel as proceeding from polytheism (as conceded in Josh 24:14) through henotheism (the demand for exclusive worship of YHWH *by Israel,* while accepting the existence of the gods of other nations) to true monotheism (the explicit denial of the existence of any other gods than YHWH) as a final and fairly late conclusion of the process.

According to some scholars the first and second stages span most of the Old Testament history of Israel. That is, originally Israelite religion was virtually indistinguishable from Canaanite religion. Then, for centuries, the major drive within Israel was merely to get Israel to be loyal to their national covenant with YHWH and not "go after other gods." The other gods that they might be tempted to go after were clearly presumed to exist. Yair Hoffman, for example, argues that even in the Deuteronomic traditions, the characteristic phrase *ʾĕlōhîm ʾăḥērîm,* "other gods," presumes rather than denies their existence as gods. "The phrase, . . . although reflecting some idea of otherness, does not certify that these deities were considered an utterly different essence from the God of Israel. . . . They are *other* gods since they are not *our*s."[2] Finally, only in the late exile (to which Isaiah 40—55 are assigned) did anyone in Israel say in so many words that no other god than YHWH even existed.[3] Only at that final stage was it envisaged that the category of deity was a house with one sole and exclusive occupant—YHWH.

On this view the answer to our question about whether or not, in the religion

[1]Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel,* JSOT Supplement Series 241 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). Gnuse's study, of course, is only one of a very large number of scholarly explorations of the origins and history of monotheism in Israelite religion, and its bibliography is a useful guide to that literature. As explained in the introduction to part two, however, it is beyond our scope to engage that issue here.

[2]Yair Hoffman, "The Concept of 'Other Gods' in the Deuteronomistic Literature," in *Politics and Theopolitics,* ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 70-71.

[3]For a general critique of this evolutionary view of Israel's religion and the historical reconstruction on which it is based, see Richard Bauckham, "Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 187-232.

of Israel, other gods existed depends on the point in the chronological development of Israel at which the question is asked. Supposing we could have approached an Israelite and asked, Do you believe that there are other gods as well as YHWH? For a long period, the answer we would have received (according to the critical consensus) would have been, "Of course. There are many gods. YHWH is one of the gods, and a very powerful one, so we're rather glad he's our god." Then, when the more exclusive ideas of a national covenant were introduced and emphasized by the prophets and the reforming Deuteronomistic party, the answer would have been, "Yes, other nations have their own gods, but YHWH is the only God that *Israel* must worship, or we will face the consequences of his anger." That view clashed with a more liberal, popular polytheism for a long time. Finally, however, with the triumph of the "official" Yahwistic party in the late exile and postexilic period, the answer eventually would have been a firm, "No, YHWH alone is 'the God,' and other gods have no real existence at all. All so-called gods are actually nonentities."

Such a neat linear view, however, is almost certainly just that—too neat. It is far too simple to put the question (or its answer) in a simple binary form: Do other gods exist, or do they not exist? Are they something or nothing? The issue is more complex and depends on the predicate of such questions. What needs to be added to the question is: Do other gods have existence of the same order as YHWH does? Are they the same "thing" as he is [the same divine "something"]? Or are they not what he is ["nothing", i.e., no divine thing]?

The essence of Israelite monotheism lies in what it affirms dynamically about YHWH, not primarily in what it denies about other gods. Nevertheless, what it affirms about YHWH has unavoidable consequences for whatever may be claimed about other gods. Commenting particularly on Deuteronomy, and disputing Nathan MacDonald's argument that the book does not deny the existence of other gods (and is therefore not formally monotheistic, in terms of the Enlightenment categories that MacDonald rightly rejects as irrelevant and damaging in Old Testament study), Richard Bauckham makes the following carefully nuanced point:

> What Israel is able to recognize about YHWH, from his acts for Israel, that distinguishes YHWH from the gods of the nations is that he is "the God" or "the god of gods." This means primarily that he has unrivalled power throughout the cosmos. The earth, the heavens and the heaven of heavens belong to him (10:14). By contrast, the gods of the nations are impotent nonentities, who cannot protect and deliver even their own peoples. This is the message of the song of Moses (see especially 32:37-39). The need to distinguish among "the gods" between the one who is supreme (YHWH) and the others who are not just subordinate but powerless,

> creates, on the one hand, the usages "the God" and "the god of gods," and, on the other hand, the contemptuous "non-god" (32:17: *lo' 'eloah;* 32:21: *lo' 'el*), and "their mere puffs of air" (32:21: *hab'lehem*). Though called gods, the other gods do not really deserve the term, because they are not *effective* divinities acting with power in the world. YHWH alone is the God with supreme power. . . (32:39). . . . It is not enough to observe that Deuteronomy does not deny the *existence* of other gods. We should also recognize that, once we do attend to the ontological implications that MacDonald admits Deuteronomy's "doctrine of God" must have, this theology is driving an ontological division through the midst of the old category "gods" such that YHWH appears in a class of his own.[4]

So, coming back to the question, are the gods something or nothing? If asked *in relation to YHWH,* the answer has to be *nothing*. Nothing whatsoever compares with YHWH, or stands in the same category as he does. YHWH is not one of a generic category—"the gods." YHWH alone is "the God," in what Bauckham calls "transcendent uniqueness."[5] With reference to Yair Hoffman's point above, while it may be true to say that the phrase "other gods" does not by itself imply that "these deities were considered an utterly different essence from the God of Israel," nevertheless what is said about YHWH makes it categorically clear that *he* is of an utterly different essence from *them*. "YHWH, he is the God; there is no other beside him" (Deut 4:35, my translation).

But if the question is asked *in relation to those who worship* the other gods—whether the nations who claim them as their own national deities or even in relation to the temptation that Israel faced to "go after" them—then the answer can certainly be *something*. The gods of the nations, with their names, statues, myths and cults, clearly do have an existence in the life, culture and history of those who treat them as their gods. It is not nonsense to form sentences like, Marduk was a god worshiped by the people of Babylon. Only excessive pedantry would complain that since Marduk did not have any real divine existence it is meaningless to say that anybody worshiped him. In the context of such a sentence (and all similar descriptions of human religions), it makes understandable sense to talk about other gods as "something"—something that exists in the world of human experience. In other words, it is not impossible, theologically or in ordinary discourse, to answer the question, Are other gods something or nothing? with the paradox, both. They are *nothing in relation to YHWH;* they are *something in relation to their worshipers.*

This is precisely the paradox that Paul carefully articulates in his response to

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[4]Ibid., p. 196.
[5]Ibid., p. 211.

the problem of meat sacrificed to idols in Corinth. Paul agrees with the creedal affirmation of those who based their freedom in the matter on the Jewish *Shema*. There is only one God and Lord, and so "an idol is nothing at all in the world" (1 Cor 8:4). Yet in the next sentence Paul says, "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords') . . ." There is *something* there, even if it is not in any sense equivalent to the one God, the Father and the one Lord, Jesus Christ. What that something actually is, Paul (and we) will return to. But his double assertion is clear enough: gods and idols do exist; but they do not have the *divine* existence that the one living God alone possesses.

If Paul, a first-century Jew, basing his whole theological worldview on the Scriptures we call the Old Testament, could sustain this dual perspective, there seems no reason why it would have been impossible for those who shared his faith in preceding centuries to have held a similar paradox quite comfortably. It is clearly the perspective of the great polemical chapters Isaiah 40—48, for example. From YHWH's point of view, expressed in the soaring poetry of the prophet, the gods are simply "less than nothing" and "utterly worthless" (Is 41:24). Yet from the point of view of the exiles with their cowering inferiority complex, the gods of Babylon can be challenged to come into court and be exposed there as powerless (Is 41:21-24), can be mocked as human artifacts (Is 44:9-20), can be caricatured as stooping down from heaven in a futile attempt to save, not their worshipers to whom they are now a useless burden but their own idols (Is 46:1-2). All of this rhetoric is expended on the gods because they are "something"—something that Israel must see for what it is and be freed from, something that must be debunked and dismissed, so that it no longer stands in the way of Israel's restoration to the worship of their living Redeemer God.

What was possible for the prophet was surely no less possible for the author of a book of such theological depth and subtlety as Deuteronomy. And indeed we find the same paradoxical duality. On the one hand, other gods are nothing when the point of reference or comparison is YHWH. I can find no other way to understand the following affirmations than that they simply mean what they say: YHWH alone is transcendently God, the sole owner and ruler of the universe.

> The LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. (Deut 4:39).
>
> To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. (Deut 10:14)
>
> The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God. (Deut 10:17)

See now that I myself am He!
There is no god besides me.
I put to death and I bring to life,
I have wounded and I will heal,
and no one can deliver out of my hand. (Deut 32:39)

In the context of such affirmations the question as to what other gods may be receives its verdict: They are "not God (Deut 32:17), "what is no god" (Deut 32:21). In short, *nothing*—nothing in comparison to YHWH.

Yet on the other hand the same book, contemplating the enticing attractiveness and seductive power of the religious culture that lay ahead of Israel when they crossed the Jordan (the gods and idols, sacred places, the male and female fertility symbols, the apparent success of a whole civilization based on serving these gods) knew that in warning Israel repeatedly to avoid such idolatry, they were warning them against *something*—something very real and very dangerous. Furthermore, to the extent that other nations worshiped heavenly bodies, the objects of their worship were certainly something with real existence—"the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array" (Deut 4:19). Israel was not to worship them because they are part of the created order, and as such YHWH had assigned them "to all the nations under heaven"—not intending them to be worshiped but to be enjoyed for their created purpose as light givers.[6]

So, then, it seems a futile exercise to attempt to unravel the Old Testament documents and lay them out along a line of progressive religious development on the flawed assumption that people who speak about "other gods" as if they existed in some sense cannot at the same time have believed that YHWH alone is God. The logical conclusion of such an argument would be that once you become convinced of monotheism you should never again even speak about "other gods," lest you be thought to be granting them real existence as divine. Yet that would be an absurd restriction on theological discourse. How then could Paul have even discussed the relationship between the living God and the gods and idols of the world in which his mission took place? Are we to say that because Paul refers to these things, in order to critique them, he must have believed in their existence in some sense comparable to the divine reality of the living God of Israel revealed in Christ? We have Paul's own word for it that he assuredly did not mean that. And yet Old Testament scholars repeatedly allege

[6]In my view it is significant that Deut 4:19 does not explicitly say that God apportioned the heavenly bodies to be worshiped. He simply gave these gifts of creation to all nations—which included Israel. The fact that other nations do in fact worship them is not to be imitated by Israel.

that simply by referring to the gods of the nations around them the Israelites must have believed in their real existence on a par with YHWH.

What was true for Paul is equally true for us as contemporary Christians. Missiological discourse and missional practice necessarily have to take account of the existence (in some sense) of other gods and the phenomenon of idolatry. They are unquestionably "something." And yet we are able to engage in such discourse without compromising our fundamental biblical monotheism that there is one and only one living God, known to us in the fullness of his trinitarian revelation. If this were not so, then we would be guilty of implicit polytheism in singing such words as these from a missionary hymn:

> Where other lords beside Thee
> Hold their unhindered sway,
> Where forces that defied Thee
> Defy Thee still today . . . [7]

We can sing such words, of course, in full assurance of Paul's affirmation (which, we remember, was based on Deuteronomy and, apart from its christological claim, expressed a paradox that Deuteronomy would have understood and accepted) that although there are many gods and lords in the world, there is in reality only one Lord and one God, from whom and for whom all things exist. If *we* can sing such words and engage in the kind of theological discourse that underlies them without thereby placing ourselves at some inferior stage of religious evolution that falls short of true monotheism, I can see no reason why it is necessary to place an ancient Israelite in some such artificial location when he or she also sang, prophesied or legislated making reference to "other gods" that held sway over the nations or defied YHWH, the one living God.

So, if the gods are not God and yet exist as "something," what are they? If they do not exist within the realm of true divinity (the realm in which YHWH is the sole and exclusive incumbent), then they must exist within the only other realm of being—the created order. And if they are created entities, they must exist either within the world of the *physical* creation (which subdivides into the natural order created by God and the products of human manufacture) or in the *invisible* world of the nonhuman spirits also created by God. The Bible offers us all three as ways of categorizing the "something" of idolatry. Idols and gods may be (1) objects within the visible creation, (2) demons, or (3) the product of human hands.

Idols and gods as objects within creation. In the physical creation it was

[7]Frank Houghton, "Facing a Task Unfinished," 1930 by © Overseas Missionary Fellowship.

well observed in Israel that some people regarded the heavenly bodies as gods and worshiped them, while others did the same to creatures on the earth—whether nonhuman animals or even fellow human beings. All of these, of course, since they are created by the living God should not in themselves be objects of worship. The warning given against such deification of the created order in Deuteronomy 4:15-21 interestingly (and almost certainly deliberately) lists the objects thus worshiped in directly opposite order to the order of their creation in Genesis 1: humans, male and female; land animals; birds of the air; fish in the waters; sun, moon and stars. The rhetorical effect matches the theological implication: When people worship creation instead of the Creator, everything is turned upside down. Idolatry produces disorder in all our fundamental relationships.

Worship of the heavenly bodies was as ancient as it was widespread, but it was inconsistent with Israel's faith in YHWH as Creator. Thus even in the mouth of Job (who is not described as an Israelite but is commended by the narrator and by YHWH himself as a devout worshiper of God), it is rejected as sin and unfaithfulness.

> If I have regarded the sun in its radiance
> or the moon moving in splendor,
> so that my heart was secretly enticed
> and my hand offered them a kiss of homage,
> then these also would be sins to be judged,
> for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. (Job 31:26-28)

Nevertheless, astral worship clearly infected Israel badly at times. Amos 5:26 is evidence for it as early as the eighth century B.C.[8] It is included in the list of idolatries for which the northern kingdom of Israel was judged and destroyed (2 Kings 17:16). Manasseh of Judah added worship of the starry host to all the other accumulated evils of his reign (2 Kings 21:3-5). Even in the wake of Josiah's great purging reformation, Ezekiel in his temple vision was horrified to see people in the very courts of the temple bowing down to the sun in the east, with their backsides (literally) raised to the temple of the Lord himself (Ezek 8:16). Star gods were of course the most powerful deities of the Mesopotamian cultures, so such actions were probably intended to placate the gods of their most powerful contemporary enemy—Babylon. A very different approach to such astral deities was taken in Isaiah 40:26. Inviting the exiles, who were probably dazzled by the apparent power of these gods of their conquerors, to look

[8]The text is somewhat difficult (see NIV footnote), but it certainly refers to the worship of star gods.

up to the heavens, the prophet simply asks the question, Who created all these? The very question unmasks them. The stars are not all-powerful gods controlling the destinies of nations. They are not even gods at all. They are merely creatures of the living God, summoned and controlled by his authority.

Worship of the nonhuman animal creation is also common, and in ancient Israel's context was particularly associated with Egypt, where a variety of animals and reptiles were deified. There is less evidence that animal worship ever seriously infected Israel's own worship, but again Ezekiel was shocked to be shown seventy elders of Israel (the phrase itself recalls the role that such a group had played in the covenantal communion with YHWH at Sinai [Ex 24:9-11]), in a darkened, smoke-filled inner room of the temple, worshiping "all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals" (Ezek 8:9-12). Some commentators suggest that this may also have been a political action aimed at securing the help of Egyptian forces against Babylon by supplicating their theriomorphic (animal-shaped) gods. If so, it would indicate the advanced degradation of the temple cult in the late monarchy, with some leaders appealing to the gods of Babylon and others just a few rooms away appealing to the gods of Egypt.

Idols and gods as demons. Turning to the nonphysical created order, Israel was well aware of the hosts of heaven, the spiritual beings that surround the seat of God's supreme government, that serve God's purposes and do God's bidding. Mostly. For Israel was also aware (though they gave the matter less theological reflection) of agencies within that exalted company that *questioned* God (as did "the satan," or the accuser, in Job 1) or *challenged* God's truthfulness and benevolence (as did the serpent, whatever it represents, in Gen 3) or *accused* God's servants (as the satan does to Joshua, the postexilic high priest, in Zech 3:1-2). Such spirits, however they were envisioned, remain entirely subject to YHWH's authority, so that even a "lying spirit" can be dispatched to serve the purpose of YHWH's intended judgment on Ahab (1 Kings 22:19-23).

Only rarely do Old Testament texts connect the worship of other gods with demons, but the rarity should not lead us to overlook the fact that the connection was made, for it was certainly picked up and amplified theologically in the New Testament. Thus, for example, it is an assumption made by Paul, doubtless with what he regarded as scriptural legitimacy, that flirting with idols could lead to participation with demons (1 Cor 10:18-21).

Although the Old Testament itself contains no theological reflection on this understanding of idolatry (that is, as the worship of demons), it was the natural development of Israel's realization that the "mute" gods of the pagans did in fact have supernatural powers. Since there was only one God, such power could not be at-

tributed to a god; hence the belief arose that idols represented demonic spirits.[9]

The connection seems to have been made at an early stage since the first text specifically to speak of other gods as demons is the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, which is acknowledged by many scholars to be very early Israelite poetry.[10]

> They made him jealous with their foreign gods
> and angered him with their idols.
> They sacrificed to demons, which are not God. (Deut 32:16-17; cf. 21)[11]

Psalm 106 has a similar purpose to Deuteronomy 32: it recounts the history of Israel's unfaithfulness in contrast to all that God had done for them as a way of vindicating the judgment that had overwhelmed Israel and from which they now prayed to be saved. As in Deuteronomy 32 also, the primary focus is on the sin of idolatry. First, the idolatry of the golden bull calf at Mount Sinai is mentioned (Ps 106:19-20—in a wonderfully sarcastic contrast between YHWH as the "Glory" of Israel and "an image of a bull, which eats grass"!). Second, the terrible apostasy at Baal Peor is recalled, where the gods are described as "lifeless gods" (Ps 106:28, lit. "they ate sacrifices of dead ones/things"). Finally, in the land itself, Israel, against all instructions, followed the cultic practices of the Canaanites (lit. "learned their doings").

> They mingled with the nations
> and adopted their customs.
> They worshiped their idols,
> which became a snare to them.
> They sacrificed their sons

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[9]Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 472

[10]Leviticus 17:7 prohibits the Israelites from sacrificing animals to "goat idols" *(śĕʿirim).* This may refer to demons that were thought to assume goatlike forms, as "satyrs," in the wilds of the desert. Though they are not described as gods, the prohibition clearly shows that any sacrifice to such things (whatever they were) was incompatible with covenantally exclusive worship of YHWH alone. They may have been included in the idolatry of Jeroboam (2 Chron 11:15). Some scholars also think that the mysterious "Azazel," to which one of the goats was driven in the Day of Atonement ritual (Lev 16:8, 10, 26), may have been a desert demon. But this is disputed since the meaning of the word (occurring only in this context) is otherwise unknown. Again, no explicit connection with any other god is implied (and would in any case be inconceivable as part of the ritual of Israel's most holy day). Cf. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus,* Word Biblical Commentary 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 236-38, 272-73.

[11]"Demons" in v. 17 is the Heb *šēdim*. This rare word is found only here and in Ps 106:37. It is cognate with the Akkadian word *sedu,* which in ancient Mesopotamian religion referred to protective spirits associated with the dead. The association with human sacrifice, mentioned in Psalm 106, is also attested in Mesopotamian religion.

and their daughters to demons.
They shed innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was desecrated by their blood. (Ps 106:35-38)

The close connection here between idolatry as demonic and the perpetration of innocent bloodshed is one that we will revisit later.

These (Deut 32; Ps 106) are the only two Old Testament passages that clearly and explicitly equate gods and idols with demons, though there are hints elsewhere. Psalm 96:5, for example, speaks of the worship of the non-Israelite peoples and dismisses their gods as *ʾĕlîlîm*. On this occasion the Septuagint translated that term with *daimonia*—demons, but elsewhere the word *ʾĕlîlîm* does not necessarily mean demons but refers rather to something worthless, weak, powerless, useless, of no value (e.g., Is 2:8, 20; 19:1; 31:7; Hab 2:18). It is also possible that Isaiah 65:11, which describes cultic practices for "Fortune" and "Destiny," may consider these to have been regarded by their devotees as some kind of spiritual forces that needed to be placated or importuned. And we might also ponder Hosea's use of the phrase "a spirit of prostitution"; was he implying more than a human psychological disorder, intending a greater-than-human power at work in such a *rûaḥ,* "spirit," which "leads them astray" because it "is in their heart" (Hos 4:12; 5:4)? Similarly, Zechariah parallels "the names of the idols" with "the spirit of impurity" or uncleanness in a suggestive anticipation of the regular reference in the Gospels to "unclean spirits" (Zech 13:2). The demonic dimension is at least a possibility in texts like these. But, to repeat, Deuteronomy 32:16-17 and Psalm 106:19-20 seem to be the only texts to make the connection explicit.

However, they provided scriptural foundation for Paul's blunt assertion that "the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God" (1 Cor 10:20). This conviction is of a piece with his theological assessment of idolatry elsewhere. In what was probably his earliest letter Paul recalls how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9)—"the clear implication being that their former worship of idols had been the worship of dead and false gods."[12] In Luke's record of Paul's description before Agrippa of his encounter with the risen Jesus, Paul deems this turning from idols as tantamount to being released from the power of Satan (Acts 26:18). Conversely, the book of Revelation portrays the finally impenitent and rebellious as those who,

[12]Brian Wintle, "A Biblical Perspective on Idolatry," in *The Indian Church in Context: Her Emergence, Growth and Mission,* ed. Mark T. B. Laing (Delhi: CMS/ISPCK, 2003), p. 60.

even after the initial manifestations of God's judgment, refuse to turn from their idolatry: They "did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk" (Rev 9:20).

I might add that even Jesus, when tempted by Satan to bow down in worship to him, recognized the idolatrous nature of such a temptation by resisting it with a text drawn from Deuteronomy: "Fear the LORD your God, serve him only"—a text immediately followed by the words, "Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you" (Deut 6:13-14; Mt 4:10). Satan is not more than one of God's creatures, whatever his angelic origin and spiritual power. So, given that Jesus has already been identified in the Gospel narrative as God's Son (Mt 3:17), the absurd insolence of Satan's suggestion is exposed, to imagine that God himself could be tempted to bow down to one of his own creatures. Nevertheless, given also that Matthew sees Jesus the man and the Messiah standing in the identity and place of Israel, and being tested like them in the wilderness, it was a serious question whether, like them, he could also be sucked into the idolatry of the nations by worshiping the Satan who stood behind the gods of the nations. The reversible nexus is clear: to worship other gods is to worship satanic demons; to bow down to Satan is to treat him as divine, which he is not, and thereby to be unfaithful to the living God of Israel.

Idols and gods as the work of human hands. Returning to the Old Testament, if the description of gods and idols as *demons* is rare, the description that Revelation 9:20 pairs with it—"the work of their hands"—is pervasive and typical. Indeed, second only to the fact that idolatry is fundamentally rebellion against the living God, this is probably the major basis of the critique of idolatry in the Old Testament. An idol is not even a *living* creature in its own right, but merely the *manufacture* of a creature. What possible claim can it have to be divine?

We need to take this biblical perception seriously and to sample the strength of this charge in some representative Old Testament texts. The expression "the work of a man's hands" *(maʿăśēh yĕdê-ʾādām)* is disparagingly applied to other gods a number of times. Hezekiah, for example, is not surprised that the Assyrians had been able to defeat other nations and at the same time destroy their gods. This was the point that the Assyrian general Rabshakeh had hoped would persuade Hezekiah that his own little god YHWH would fare no differently. Hezekiah knew better. So he prayed for deliverance so that the rest of the world might know better too (an interesting missional perspective that we considered on pp. 95-96). Thus Hezekiah comments, in his prayer:

> It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their

> lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, *for they were not gods [or not God],* but only wood and stone, fashioned by men's hands. Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God. (2 Kings 19:17-19, emphasis added)[13]

Psalmists also joined the contempt.

> Their idols are silver and gold,
> made by the hands of men.
> They have mouths, but cannot speak,
> eyes, but they cannot see;
> they have ears, but cannot hear,
> noses, but they cannot smell;
> they have hands but cannot feel,
> feet, but they cannot walk;
> nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
> Those who make them will be like them,
> and so will all who trust in them. (Ps 115:4-8; cf. Ps 135:15-18)

Prophets, as one would expect, adopt the same rhetorical polemic.

> With their silver and gold
> they make idols for themselves
> to their own destruction. . . .
> This calf—a craftsman made it;
> it is not God. (Hos 8:4, 6)

> They make idols for themselves from their silver,
> cleverly fashioned images,
> all of them the work of craftsmen (Hos 13:2)

> Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
> Or an image that teaches lies?
> For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
> he makes idols that cannot speak.
> Woe to him who says to wood, "Come to life!"
> Or to lifeless stone, "Wake up!"
> Can it give guidance?
> It is covered with gold and silver;
> there is no breath in it. (Hab 2:18-19)

These sharp challenges are surpassed in rhetorical and descriptive force only

[13]The Deuteronomic historian's point here, in the mouth of Hezekiah, echoes the same assessment of idols that is made in Deuteronomy 4:28.

by the other two great prophetic texts that highlight the human origins of idols: Jeremiah 10:3-5, 9, 14 and Isaiah 40:18-20; 44:9-20. These two texts are too long to reproduce, but they need to be read to feel the full force of Israel's attack on man-made, hand-made idolatry.

This is the point at which ancient Israel is frequently accused by contemporary scholars of religious ignorance and naiveté. It is alleged that Israelites regarded all pagan worship as nothing more than fetishism. Israelites mistakenly (we are told) thought that pagan worshipers regarded physical idols as having life and power in themselves. And since they obviously didn't, the whole charade was laughable to the Israelites. They (the Israelites) failed to observe the distinction between the idols as images on the one hand, and the gods or heavenly powers that such images represented in the minds and devotions of their worshipers on the other hand. Committed to aniconic worship themselves (that is, worship of YHWH without images), Israel could not understand or appreciate the subtlety of iconic worship that they saw around them. The real spiritual and psychological dynamic of the use of idols in worship was not grasped by the Israelites, so they simply mocked what they did not understand.

An example of this assumption is found in an otherwise excellent article by John Barton. He argues that from the time of Isaiah

> there develops the tradition of seeing "idols" not as warped representations of the true deity but as images of false gods, and then of identifying the other gods with their images, as if the image were all there was. It has often been noticed that this is in a sense unfair to those who use images in worship. The iconoclast sees only the image and thinks that the worshipper who uses it is bowing down before a mere physical object. But this is the iconoclast's interpretation of what the worshipper is doing. For the worshipper the image is a representation of a divine power, which is not exhausted by the image but somehow symbolized by or encapsulated in it. Nevertheless this "unfair" interpretation of idols established itself as the main line of thinking about images in the pages of the Old Testament.[14]

So runs the argument, usually with the moral that we should avoid falling into the same ignorant condemnation of those whose objects or forms of worship differ from our own. It is a way of neutralizing the Old Testament's condemnation of idolatry that is particularly attractive to the advocates of religious pluralism.[15] It is also a way of indulging our own feeling of religious (and moral)

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[14]John Barton, " 'The Work of Human Hands' (Ps 115:4): Idolatry in the Old Testament," *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 67.

[15]See, e.g., the pluralist perspective in W. Cantwell Smith, "Idolatry in Comparative Perspective," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis; London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 53-68.

superiority to the Old Testament. Since, as a result of modern anthropological research into human religion, we now understand the true spiritual dynamic of what Israel so lamentably ridiculed (we are encouraged to believe), we need not be bound by the narrow and ignorant exclusivism of these polemical texts in the Old Testament.

This widely held assumption, however, seems to me to be even more of a patronizing and unfair misunderstanding of the Israelites than that which it charges against them. For it seems very clear to me that the author of the great polemic against the gods of Babylon understood precisely the distinction that was supposed to exist between the physical idols themselves and the gods they represented. So well did he understand the pagan theology on this point that he could utilize it in cartoon form to critique idols, gods and worshipers together. So in Isaiah 46:1-2 he portrays the great Babylonian gods up in heaven—Bel and Nebo. But they are stooping down to earth. Why? Because their idols are in danger of falling off the oxcarts that they have been loaded on. The prophet understands perfectly well that the statues were not, in Babylonian thinking, the gods themselves. The gods were invisibly somewhere else "up there." Their statues were visibly "down here." His point is, however, that wherever and whatever those gods may be thought to be in a Babylonian worldview, when the crunch comes they are totally unable to save even their own statues, let alone save their worshipers. On the contrary, the gods become a burden to their worshipers who feel obliged to try to save their statues by whatever undignified means is available. The gods in the Babylonian heaven must abandon their statues to the ludicrous insecurity of staggering oxcarts on Babylonian streets.

The prophet's satire is not based on naive ignorance but on penetrating insight. In fact the whole power of his cartoon *presupposes and depends on* his understanding of the Babylonian distinction between images and the gods they stood for. He knew perfectly well that Babylonians distinguished between their idol statues and the gods they visibly depicted. His point is that the manifest failure of alleged gods even to save their own idols was laughably unimpressive.

There is evidence also in earlier narrative texts that Israelites were not so obtuse as the pluralist superiority complex wishes to paint them. They perceived that a statue or altar was not in itself the same as the god it was supposed to represent. It did not stop them mocking the impotence of the alleged god, however. Gideon's father Joash takes on a hostile crowd after his son had toppled the village altar to Baal and its Asherah pole. His words brilliantly capture the nonsense of a god who needs defending, when one had thought that the whole point of having a god was that *he* or *she* should defend *you*. At the very least a god should be able to defend its own turf and totem.

"Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? . . . If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar" (Judg 6:31).

Baal's tendency to go AWOL when most needed by his worshipers drew even sharper sarcasm from Elijah. Ahab had built him an altar and an Asherah pole. Jezebel had four hundred prophets to serve Baal. But wherever he was in spiritual reality, he was not around at the altar of his demented devotees on Mount Carmel. Elijah's mockery is an ad hominem argument addressed to their assumption that he *is* a god, after all, so he must be "somewhere else," if not here. "'Shout louder!' he said. 'Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened'" (1 Kings 18:27).

Another superbly comic narrative could even be viewed as deliberately contradicting the idea that physical objects are to be merely identified with the gods they represent. The Israelites imagined that by taking the ark of the covenant into battle, they could compel the presence and support of YHWH. The Philistines initially thought the same and trembled. But events proved both sides wrong in their assumptions (1 Sam 4:1-11). YHWH was not to be identified with any physical object in Israel's manipulative possession—not even an object commanded by himself and built to his own specification. Then, as the ark does its unwelcome circuit round the cities of the Philistines, the Philistines clearly learn to distinguish it from the God of Israel that it represents. The ark is the physical object present, but it is the hand of YHWH, the God of Israel, that smites them (1 Sam 5:6-12). If the Philistines themselves could perceive this of Israel's God, how much more did the Israelite narrator and readers make the same assumption about the Philistines' god, Dagon, and his idol? The fact that the idol falls over twice (losing his head and his hands the second time) clearly means that Dagon's alleged divine power was unable to keep his own statue vertical before the symbol of the God of Israel (1 Sam 5:2-4). The comic motif and the theological presupposition are the same as are used by Isaiah 46:1-2 against the mighty gods of Babylon.

This brings us back to our main point. The Israelites, fully aware of what *idols* were supposed to signify among those who bowed down before them, nevertheless castigated them as "the work of human hands." What then did this signify for the *gods* that the idols represented? The radical conclusion has to be that the psalmists and prophets make no distinction between the images and the gods they represented—*not because they did not know that such a distinction was there in the minds of pagan worshipers but because ultimately there was no such distinction in reality.*

The visible idols were obviously made by humans. And whatever the gods might be thought to be (by their own worshipers or by Israelites tempted to join them), they too were nothing more than human constructs. The alleged gods that the idols represented had no *divine* reality or *divine* power, for such reality and power belonged to YHWH alone. The fact that the gods, in the myths and cult of their worshipers, were thought to inhabit some other sphere generally invisible to humans made no difference to their actual status as the product of human imagination. Mere invisibility was no proof of divinity. So, in declaring the idols, which anyone could see had been manufactured by human effort and skill, to be "the work of human hands," the Israelites were doing much more than merely stating the obvious. After all, the pagan worshipers would have agreed on that point! Idol statues were indeed the work of human hands in pagan minds. Not only did everybody know that, they actually prided themselves on the skill and expense that their hands put into making those great images (as is still true in countries, such as India, where idols are an important part of popular religion). Rather, the Israelite theologians were *including* in that assessment all that the idols were believed by their worshipers to stand for—the alleged gods as well. The gods too were just as much human constructs as their statues.

John Barton sees Isaiah as the one to whom Israel owed this breakthrough realization about the gods—that they were not in reality alternative sources of *divine* power but merely human "products."[16]

> [Isaiah] departs from the idea that other gods are an alternative source of divine power, distinct from YHWH, and presents them instead as products of human devising. Whereas for Hosea it is wrong to seek alliances with other nations because this involves getting entangled with their gods, who are threatening alternative sources of divine power forbidden to the Israelites, Isaiah regards trust in foreign nations as trust in merely human sources of strength. "The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit" (Isa 31:3). The gods of other nations are similarly not gods at all, but human fictions: they are manmade and can be described as "the work of their hands" (2:8). To rely on a foreign god is not to rely on another [divine] source of strength, not even one which is forbidden, but to rely on something which human beings have devised and which is therefore no stronger than they are. Thus there is no talk of cultic *apostasy* in Isaiah in the sense of abandoning Yahweh for other gods who are real, but more of cultic *stupidity*, worshiping as a divine source of strength something that is no more powerful than the worshippers themselves.[17]

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[16]Barton, "Work of Human Hands," pp. 63-72.
[17]Ibid., p. 66.

In my view Barton is absolutely right here.[18] He has perceived something quite radical and profound in Israel's assessment of idolatry, and something which has far-reaching missiological significance. Those gods that people worship, other than the one living God, are something within the created order, with no objective divine reality. When they are not objects within the physical creation (such as the sun and stars or living creatures), when they are not demons or spirits of some kind, then they must be (and are most commonly described as) "the work of human hands." *The alleged gods are in fact no different from the idols that represent them; they are both human constructs.* In worshiping them, we give allegiance, we attribute power and authority, we submit ourselves to something that we ourselves have created. In the final analysis the satire of Isaiah 44:9-20 is not off the mark. There is *in principle* no difference between the domestic fetishist and the sophisticated iconic worshiper of the great gods of Babylon. Whether addressing the piece of wood he has carved for himself as if it were actually a god (Is 44:17) or calling out to the invisible state gods supposedly represented in the gilded statues (Is 46:7), the worshiper is engaged in an exercise in futility. The one is as much the product of collective human imagination as the other is the work of individual human hands. There is no salvation in either.

It seems significant that most of the references to gods and idols being the work of human hands occur in contexts where it is particularly national or state gods that are in view. For this is where the power of the gods seems strongest and where Israel's radical assertion is correspondingly most countercultural and polemical. Surely these great national gods are mighty and powerful divinities! Not so, reply the prophets; they are no more powerful than the people who make them. And in making them, of course, the rulers of the nations have embodied their own pride, greed and aggression. National gods are the ultimate deification of human pride, but they remain human constructs, nevertheless.

For what did it actually mean to say that the great gods of Assyria had defeated the lesser gods of the smaller nations around Judah, for example? Only that the Assyrian king and his armies had rampaged through those countries with vicious cruelty and greed (Is 10:12-14). Indeed that was the identification made by the Assyrian king and his spokesman themselves (2 Kings 18:33-35).

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[18]Except that I would not view the difference between Hosea and Isaiah in the terms Barton expresses it. I doubt if Hosea imagined that the other gods of the nations with whom Israel were getting politically entangled had objective divine reality alternative to YHWH any more than Isaiah did (particularly in view of the way he also dismisses them as human products in Hos 8:4, 6; 13:2; 14:3). So while I believe Barton rightly understands Isaiah's meaning, I am not convinced it was such a "breakthrough" as he makes out.

Within their worldview, what happened in the sphere of kings and armies reflected what was going on in the sphere of the gods. So there was no difficulty for a king to claim to have defeated gods. Kings and gods could be interchangeable in grammar or on the ground. The Israelite prophets accepted this worldview at one level but decisively rejected it at another. The international arena was indeed the sphere of divine action (that was the part they agreed on). But far from it being an arena packed with clashing gods (that was the part they rejected), only one divine being was active within it—YHWH, the God of Israel, to whom Hezekiah could say, "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made the heavens and the earth" (2 Kings 19:15). The gods to which the Assyrians attributed their victory, just as much as the gods of the nations they had pillaged, were "not gods" or "not God"—that is they had no share in the sovereign divine reality that belonged to YHWH alone—but were "fashioned by mens hands" (v. 18).

Habakkuk makes the same assertion. Having described in graphic detail the arrogance, the violence, the human and ecological destructiveness of Assyria's imperial expansion (Hab 2:3-17), he scoffs at the idea that their gods could provide any defense against the doom that is coming to them from the hand of the Lord. That is the context of the following verses and the point of their scorn, which is followed by the customary mockery of wood and stone, decked out in silver and gold but devoid of life and breath:

> Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it?
> Or an image that teaches lies?
> For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
> he makes idols that cannot speak. (Hab 2:18)

There could hardly be a clearer articulation of exactly what Israel's prophets believed about the great state gods of their imperial enemies than that single line: "he who makes it trusts in his own creation" (lit. "the maker of the thing he has made trusts in it"). There is no divine power in or behind or above the idols. They are not representations of deity but fictions of humanity. By contrast, Habakkuk goes on:

> But the LORD is in his holy temple;
> let all the earth [not just Israel] be silent before him. (Hab 2:20)

If this was true for the Assyrian idol-worshipers themselves (that their gods were the work of human hands), then the same shattering exposure could be aimed at those *Israelites* who opted to worship the gods of Assyria (or any other nation) as a means of cementing an alliance or gaining some benefit (or at least

a stay of execution). Thus, when Hosea writes a liturgy of repentance (sadly never used) for the people of Israel, he tells them that they needed to recognize the impotence of the Assyrian military machine to save them *precisely because* their trust in it was nothing more than trusting in gods *their own hands* had made. In other words, the power that Assyria's gods seemed to exercise over Israel was as much the product of *Israel's* imagination as of the Assyrians. To worship them was to connive in the attribution of divinity to what was a human construct. So to repent of trusting in Assyria's armed forces (and thereby trusting in Assyrian gods) was to repent of having *made gods for themselves*—not (as Barton suggests, mistakenly in my view) of trusting an alternative source of power that was assumed to be genuinely divine. The tight synonymous parallelism between "Assyria," "horses," "our gods" and "the work of our hands" makes this unmistakeable.

> Take words with you
> and return to the LORD.
> Say to him:
> "Forgive all our sins
> and receive us graciously,
> that we may offer the fruit of our lips.
> *Assyria* cannot save us;
> we will not mount *war-horses*.
> We will never again say '*Our gods*'
> to *what our own hands have made*." (Hos 14:2-3, emphasis added)

Hosea preached to the northern kingdom of Israel. There is some irony in telling them that in going after the gods of *Assyria* they were trusting in gods of their own manufacture, since the founding king of Israel had effectively done the same thing to YHWH himself and for the same reason—to bolster the security of his new and vulnerable state. "Jeroboam the son of Nebat who made Israel to sin" (e.g., 1 Kings 15:34; 16:19) is the name on the epitaph of the one who led the northern tribes in their secession from Judah. His sin, as reenacted in so many of his successors, was idolatry. But the description of its original emergence in 1 Kings 12:26-33 shows both its motivation and its subtlety. Jeroboam's intention was to prevent his population reverting to political allegiance to Jerusalem through religious pilgrimage to YHWH's temple there. So he provided calf images at opposite ends of his kingdom as places for the northern tribes to worship the God who had brought them up out of Egypt. Clearly he did not want to be seen to be suggesting the worship of any other god but YHWH, and indeed the text hints that Jeroboam may have been claiming the mantle of Moses in

having delivered the tribes from the oppression of Solomon and son. Nevertheless, he reconstructed the whole religious apparatus of his state so that the cult of YHWH was clearly under his patronage.[19] So the narrative subtly implies that while the name at the top of the page still said "YHWH," the table of contents was very much of Jeroboam's own making. YHWH had been fashioned like a god made by human hands. The living God was being commandeered and crafted through state propaganda to serve the needs of national security—a form of idolatry that did not perish with Jeroboam.

Moving back from the prophets to the psalm that most sharply declares the human origin of idols, Psalm 115, it is noticeable again that the polemical context is between Israel and the nations. The familiar opening verse of the psalm also takes on greater significance in the light of our discussion thus far. If the gods of a nation are in fact the collective human construct of that nation's pride, then the glory of a god is identical to the glory of its nation and vice versa. To glorify the nation's god usually meant praising their combined military might. The Israelite psalmist denies that this can be any part of the motivation for praising YHWH, the God of Israel. On the contrary, he says, with double emphasis:

> Not to us, O LORD, not to us
> but to your name be the glory,
> because of your love and faithfulness. (Ps 115:1)

That is to say, to give glory to YHWH must never be construed as just another way of giving glory to his people *Israel*. On the contrary, YHWH must be praised for his own distinct identity and character, not just as a symbol or cipher for the people's own self-congratulation (a confusion that is as seductive as it is rampant among modern nations who claim to honor "God" or who ask God to "bless" them).

From this unusual beginning, the psalm continues with an imaginary exchange between the other nations and Israel.

> Why do the nations say,
> "Where is their God?"
> Our God is in heaven;
> he does whatever pleases him.
> But their idols are silver and gold,
> made by the hands of men. (Ps 115:2-4)

[19]This state of affairs is exposed in the revealing indignation of the priest of Bethel against what he regarded as the seditious prophecies of Amos: "this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom" (Amos 7:13).

"Where is your God?" the nations taunt Israel in mockery of Israel's lack of visible images of YHWH.

"In heaven, where are yours?" retorts Israel.

And in answering his own implied question—"Where are the gods of the nations?" the psalmist declares, "they are on earth like those who make them." YHWH's invisible name badge reads "Sole Ruler of heaven." The all-too-visible generic trademark of the other gods reads "Made on earth." The later part of the psalm then combines this contrast between heaven and earth (both of which have been made by YHWH, but as distinct realms for his own and human habitation) with the contrast between life and death. The implication is that the gods and idols critiqued in the first part of the psalm are not only *not* gods in heaven, they are of the earth, lifeless and incapable of giving blessing in the way that only YHWH can.

> May you be blessed by the LORD,
> the Maker of heaven and earth.
>
> The highest heavens belong to the LORD,
> but the earth he has given to man.
> It is not the dead who praise the LORD,
> those who go down to silence;
> it is we who extol the LORD,
> both now and for evermore. (Ps 115:15-18)[20]

> The contrast between Yahweh and purported gods is thus underscored through a contrast between the higher realm in which Yahweh lives and the inhabited world below, as if to suggest that correspondingly the idols belong to the human world, not the divine one. This is Isaiah's point all over again. Second, there is a contrast between the living and the dead. . . . The fact that this point is made here, at the end of a Psalm about the superiority of Yahweh to other "gods" seems to me significant. For idols belong essentially to the world of the dead in OT thought: they are as lifeless as their worshippers, whereas Yahweh "is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10). Thus this Psalm forms a carefully thought out unity, based on the contrast between the God of Israel and the "idols" of the nations and drawing in other significant contrasts: between heaven and earth, between the living and the dead, and between human and divine power.[21]

The pinnacle (or nadir) of gods as the work of human hands is when humans claim to be their own gods or to be the divine source of their own power. The

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[20]Verse 16 literally reads, "to the sons of adam"—which provides connecting similarity to the description of the idols as "the work of the hands of adam" in v. 4.

[21]Barton, "Work of Human Hands," p. 70.

quip about the self-made man who worships his creator is recognized in the Old Testament and even comes in for the same kind of grim humor in the process of unmasking the absurdity and deception of such arrogance. Yet again, it is usually the vice of kings and emperors.

Ezekiel exposes the self-divination of the king of Tyre and the inevitable judgment it brings on him and his empire:

> In the pride of your heart
> you say, "I am a god;
> I sit on the throne of a god
> in the heart of the seas."
> But you are a man and not a god,
> though you think you are as wise as a god. . . .
> Will you then say, "I am a god,"
> in the presence of those who kill you?
> You will be but a man, not a god,
> in the hands of those who slay you. (Ezek 28:2, 9)

Similarly, Ezekiel pointedly expresses the arrogance of the Pharaoh of Egypt who imagines himself to be the source of his own prosperity, claiming the divine power of creation over the Nile itself that provides the wealth of Egypt.

> I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
> you great monster lying among your streams.
> You say, "The Nile is mine;
> I made it for myself." (Ezek 29:3)

What insane arrogance and self-deception fuel such an absurd claim! Yet it is echoed in the idolatrous worship of mammon that characterizes contemporary global capitalism. Long before Ezekiel, Israel was warned against such economic arrogance and urged to remember the true source of their wealth in Deuteronomy 8:17-18.

Not surprisingly, Babylon is accused of similar divine pretensions, uttering words that should only ever come from the mouth of the living God.

> Now then, listen, you wanton creature,
> lounging in your security
> and saying to yourself,
> "I am, and there is none beside me.
> I will never be a widow
> or suffer the loss of children."
> Both of these will overtake you
> in a moment, on a single day. . . .

> Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
> when you say to yourself,
> "I am, and there is none besides me." (Is 47:8-10)

Nebuchadnezzar suffered from such pretensions of deity, it seems, but was humbled into seeing the insanity of them and then restored simultaneously to sanity and submission to the living God (Dan 4).

When we review the material we have surveyed in this section, it is enormously challenging to the whole world of gods and idols, and was clearly intended to be so. For we have observed this stance across the wide range of Old Testament literature from many different historical periods.

It is not unusual for any people to make great claims for their own deity. In this principle and practice, Israel was no different from its neighbors.[22] But to claim transcendent uniqueness and universality for that deity, to the exclusion of all others, and defend the claim by reference to his extraordinary and unparalleled "jealousy," as Israel did for YHWH, was something not found in anything like the same degree elsewhere. Referring to the uniqueness of the first commandment, in comparison to the more pluralistic tolerance of most ancient Near Eastern religion, Werner Schmidt comments:

> There is no real model for it, and it cannot be derived from the neighboring religions, but is opposed to their essential nature. History looks for analogies for all phenomena, but so far as we know at present it is impossible to show that the first and second commandments were borrowed from elsewhere. Exclusiveness of creed is unique to Israel.[23]

But then to go further still and declare again and again as a pervasive matter of theological worldview that the gods of the nations, like the idols that visibly represent them, are "the work of human hands"—a human construct with no divine substance—is something else and quite unparalleled. Yet there seems no other way to account for the extensiveness of this theme in the Old Testament. Israel did *not* misunderstand the nature of idolatry or the assumptions that were made by other worshipers about their own gods. On the contrary, understanding those assumptions and claims very well, they simply refused to accept them. The categorical assertion of Psalm 96:5 is devastating. "All the gods of the na-

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[22]See, e.g., the survey provided by Morton Smith, "The Common Theology of the Ancient Near East," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient near East,* ed. F. E. Greenspan (New York: New York University Press, 1991), pp. 49-65. Smith, however, goes on to minimize any specific distinctiveness in the faith of Israel.

[23]Werner H. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster; Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 70.

tions are idols *[ʾĕlîlîm]*"—that is, the gods themselves share the same insubstantial transience as the idols, for they too are man-made.

To say that the gods are work of human hands is to prick human *hubris* and to invite fierce repudiation. Paul saying it in Ephesus was enough to start a riot (Acts 19:23-41). For if it is indeed true that the gods we exalt so highly are resplendent products of our own creativity, then it is not surprising that we defend them so belligerently. And in our own jealous protectiveness of the gods we created for ourselves, we display a parody of the true jealousy that is the prerogative of the only true God whom we did not create. We invest so much of ourselves in our gods, spend so much on them and blend our identity and significance with theirs that it simply will not do for us to have them unmasked, mocked or toppled. And yet, of course, topple they must before the living God. For that is the destiny of all human effort that is not for the glory of God or offered to be redeemed by him.

> Pride of man and earthly glory,
> Sword and crown betray his trust;
> What with care and toil he buildeth,
> Tower and temple fall to dust.
> But God's power,
> Hour by hour,
> Is my temple and my tower.[24]

In the end, the gods of human creation for all their arrogant claims and masquerade are no greater than gilded statues that have to be nailed down to keep them vertical. Even then it's a precarious posture. Philistine god Dagon was as flattened by the living God and Philistine giant Goliath was by David's sling—and for the same didactic purpose: "And the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Sam 17:46).

Babylonian Bel and Nebo would exit the stage of history with no greater dignity (Is 46:1-2). Against all such pretensions of men and the products of men, Isaiah affirms that

> The LORD Almighty has a day in store
> for all the proud and lofty,
> for all that is exalted
> (and they will be humbled) . . .
> The arrogance of man will be brought low
> and the pride of men will be humbled;

[24]Joachim Neander (1650-1680), "All My Hope on God Is Founded," adapted by Robert S. Bridges in 1899.

> the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,
> and the idols will totally disappear. (Is 2:12, 17-18)

And when the Lord's judgment falls it will include in its universal scope both the arrogant human rulers on earth and the gods they have located in heaven.

> In that day the LORD will punish
> the powers in the heavens above
> and the kings on the earth below. (Is 24:21)[25]

Drawing on such scriptural roots, Paul affirms both the created nature of the powers and associated ideologies that hold sway over human lives and minds, and the decisive judgment of all these powers at the cross of Christ:

> See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. . . . Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:8, 15)

Critique and hope. What then are the paradoxes of the gods in the Bible? We have discussed two.

The first is that they are *nothing* in terms of the divine reality that is claimed for them. There is only one rightful occupant of the category of deity, and that is the Lord God of the biblical revelation, Creator and Ruler of the universe. Beside him there is no other legitimate claim to deity. In that sense, as Paul affirmed as an item of the clear Old Testament monotheism that he took as axiomatic: a god is nothing in this world, and neither is an idol. And yet idols clearly do exist in our observable world, and the gods they represent also exist within history as part of human discourse, experience and activity. They are *something*—something whose existence is assumed in the command not to worship them. But as I have argued, the belief that gods exist in this sense is not incompatible with the fundamental bedrock of biblical monotheism—the

[25]The second line literally says, "the host of the height in the height." While this does not specifically describe these celestial armies as "gods," they are certainly powers such as are called gods elsewhere. Either, as elsewhere in Isaiah, they are regarded as human figments—the alleged divine sponsors of the rule of the kings or they may be actual spiritual powers, the angelic hosts that link themselves to human government in some way. In either case, "the gods" refers to something within the created order—either of human manufacture or angelic—not to anything that shares in the unique divinity of YHWH who is exercising judgment. Motyer suggests that the expression "alludes to guilty spiritual forces who will be dealt with in a comprehensive settlement over the whole field of divine creation. Isaiah's assertion of the punishment of every power wherever located is the more impressive by its calm assumption of total divine sovereignty." J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 206.

Lord our God is God in heaven above and the earth below; there is no other. The gods exist as something, but not as God does, with divine identity, status, power and eternity. They may be located in heaven by those who worship them, but in reality they are of the earth, as much part of the created order as their worshipers.

The second paradox is that gods may represent and manifest the demonic order. The Old Testament (occasionally) and the New Testament (more clearly) recognize the presence and power of spiritual forces behind the gods and idols. Equally clearly they both affirm the sovereignty of the living God over all such powers, and their conclusive defeat by Christ on the cross. But the Old Testament much more frequently and unambiguously describes both idols and the gods they are presumed to represent as the work of human hands. We are the makers of our own gods—which, of course, is part of the absurdity of worshiping them.

So if the question is asked, Are other gods demons or human constructions? the answer is that they can be either or both. However, the latter is the more significant theological truth and the more dangerous deception. Human beings did not need the devil to teach us idolatry. Once we chose to reject the authority of the living God, we have ended up creating gods for ourselves, either within the created order or within the imaginations of our hearts. We are experts in doing so and the devil fosters and thrives on our expertise.

The relative scarcity of texts connecting gods and idols to *demons* and the abundance of texts describing them as *human* constructs is surely theologically significant. The contrast ensures that we keep the balance of responsibility for the sin of idolatry where it truly belongs—with us human beings. Not that we owe the devil any exoneration, but neither should we shift the blame on to him for what is our own responsibility (another trick we learned as early as the Garden of Eden). If gods are primarily human constructs, then they are our own responsibility. We pay their debts, clear up their mess, suffer their consequences. Certainly we must acknowledge the extent and effect of satanic infiltration and spiritual blindness inflicted by the evil one. But gods and idols are fundamentally what we have made. The secularist accusation against the dire consequences of human religions has some point: the gods we make are as destructive as we are ourselves—for they are the work of our own hands, and our hands are full of blood.

But there is also an element of hope in this awareness. If gods are mainly human constructs, then they are not only destructive but also *destructible*—as destructible as anything else we make on earth. *The gods too are subject to decay and death.* They are no more durable than the men or empires that make them.

The scorn of the Assyrian on the defunct gods of the nations he had conquered rebounds on himself in the light of history. For where now are the gods of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece or Rome? History is the graveyard of the gods.

Missiologically, these reflections clearly bear on the pressing question of the contemporary plurality of religions. What should be our biblically grounded response to the gods of the nations in our world today? At the very least it is clear that we cannot adopt simplistic categorizations, such as the view that all non-Christian religion is entirely demonic or that it is all purely cultural. The Bible's own subtle analysis of "other gods" makes such binary opposites completely unsatisfactory.

Mission and the Gods

Why is idolatry a missional issue? Why must mission "engage the gods," expose and unmask them? Why must we identify and condemn idolatry (as the prophets and apostles did), not only as it presents itself among those who do not yet acknowledge the living God but also (and even more so) as it works its insidious poison among those who *do* claim to know and worship the God of the Bible and who name the name of Christ (recalling that the prophets condemn idolatry in Israel far more often than in other nations)? What, in any case, is so wrong with people worshiping their own gods if they want to? And how are we to recognize the presence of other gods in human cultures? And even when we have identified them, how should we deal with them in the many different social, cultural, evangelistic and pastoral contexts in which we are called to minister? These are some of the questions to which we turn in the remainder of this chapter.

Recognizing the most crucial distinction. Arguably the most fundamental distinction in all reality is presented to us in the opening verses of the Bible. It is the distinction between the Creator God and everything else that exists anywhere. God alone is uncreated, self-existent, noncontingent. God's being depends on nothing else outside God's own self. All other reality, by contrast, is created by God and therefore is dependent on God for existence and sustenance. The creation is contingent on God. It cannot and would not exist without God. God did and could exist without it. This essential ontological duality between two orders of being (the created order and the uncreated God) is foundational to the biblical worldview.

Flowing from this, there are many other distinctions that the creation narrative alerts us to: the distinctions between day and night, between different environments on earth, between species, between humans in God's image and the

rest of the animals, between men and women. But undoubtedly the primary and most crucial distinction is that between the Creator and the creation itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is that distinction which comes under attack when the mysterious power of evil makes its appearance in that profoundly simple, yet simply profound, narrative of Genesis 3.

"You will be like God, knowing good and evil," promises the serpent—if only humans would disregard God's boundary markers (Gen 3:5). What could be more plausible or natural for a creature made in the image of God than to want to be like God? The key to the temptation seems to be in the second phrase, "knowing good and evil," which I take to imply "having moral autonomy." That is, what was being offered by the serpent and then claimed by the human pair through their disobedient act was not just the ability to *recognize* the difference between good and evil (which is surely foundational to any genuine moral freedom or moral capacity, and is commended in the Bible elsewhere) but the right to *define for oneself* good and evil. It is the prerogative of God in the supreme goodness of his own being to decide and define what constitutes goodness and therefore conversely what constitutes evil. Humans however, in choosing to decide for ourselves what *we* will deem good or evil usurp the prerogative of God in rebellious moral autonomy. And at the same time, of course, by making our own definitions in a state of rebellion and disobedience, we end up in the moral perversions and chaos that pervade fallen human life. This interpretation of the phrase is supported by the way God recognizes the nature of what has happened: "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:22). God accepts that humans have indeed breached the Creator-creature distinction. Not that humans have now *become* gods but that they have chosen to *act as though they were*—defining and deciding for themselves what they will regard as good and evil. Therein lies the root of all other forms of idolatry: we deify our own capacities, and thereby make gods of ourselves and our choices and all their implications. God then shrinks in horror from the prospect of human immortality and eternal life in such a fallen state and prevents access to the "tree of life." God has a better way to bring humanity, redeemed and cleansed, to eternal life.

At the root, then, of all idolatry is human rejection of the Godness of God and the finality of God's moral authority. The fruit of that basic rebellion is to be seen in many other ways in which idolatry blurs the distinction between God and creation, to the detriment of both.

Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones creation. Idolatry is the attempt to limit, reduce and control God by refusing his authority, constraining or manipulating his power to act, having him available to serve our interests. At the same

time, paradoxically, idolatry exalts things within the created order (whether natural objects in the heavens or on earth, or created spirits, or the products of our own hands or imaginations). Creation is then credited with a potency that belongs only to God; it is sacralized, worshiped and treated as that from which ultimate meaning can be derived. A great reversal happens: God, who should be worshiped, becomes an object to be used; creation, which is for our use and blessing, becomes the object of our worship.

Once this fundamental distinction is blurred, once this reversal takes place, then devastating personal and social consequences follow. Creation, which derives its own meaning from God, cannot give us in itself the ultimate meaning we crave, so idolatry is doomed to disappointment (to put it at its mildest). Worship of the self eventually implodes in narcissism, nihilism or sheer amoral selfishness. If nature itself is treated as divine, then all other distinctions begin to be dissolved. There is no difference between human life and all other forms of life. There is no difference between good and evil since all is ultimately one. So any objective reference point for moral discrimination becomes impossible.

In the light of such confusion the mission of God is ultimately to restore his whole creation to what it was intended to be—*God's* creation, ruled over by redeemed *humanity,* giving glory and praise to its Creator. Our mission, in participation with that divine mission, and in anticipation of its final accomplishment, is to work with God in exposing the idols that continue to blur the distinction, and to liberate men and women from the destructive delusions they foster.

Discerning the gods. Much helpful work has been done in identifying and analyzing the gods that may be said to dominate modern cultures—especially in Western societies. Some of these studies make extensive use of combined biblical and sociological tools, others less so. Such analyses have powerful missiological relevance since they apply this distinctive biblical category (idolatry) to contemporary cultural phenomena, enabling us to see below the surface and recognize idolatrous or demonic forces at work. Some of them also are specifically addressed to the missiological question of how we are to expose and confront these cultural idols and address the liberating message of the biblical gospel to those who are captivated by them. A small sampling of such studies must suffice, since the following works range very widely.

Jacques Ellul was one of the earliest to connect biblical categories of idolatry with contemporary Western cultural trends, especially secularism.[26] He analyzes the sacred and symbolic aspects of technique, sex, the nation-state, revolution

[26]Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (London: Mowbrays, 1976).

and the mythology of history and science. J. A. Walter applied the same methodology to a range of social phenomena, many of which appear good in themselves, but easily become elevated to idolatrous status, such as: work, the family, suburbia, individualism, ecology, race, and the media.[27] Bob Goudzwaard extended the analysis to the whole realm of ideology, focusing especially on the ideologies of revolution, the nation, material prosperity and guaranteed security.[28] Walter Wink's trilogy is one of the most extensive studies of the "powers" in biblical (and especially New Testament) thought, but Wink is criticized for not giving sufficient weight to the biblical assertions about the objective demonic aspects of their infiltration of human structures.[29] Clinton Arnold is more balanced in that respect.[30] Vinoth Ramachandra presses the analysis of modernity and its sequel further in observing the violence of the new idolatries, the dogmatism of those who idolize science and the continuing idolatry of "reason and unreason."[31] Peter Moore tackles the various idolatries of Western culture in a more apologetic mode, addressing those who may be dazzled by them—including New Age-ism, relativism, narcissism and hedonism.[32] Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz edit a volume in which a number of biblical scholars examine consumerism as a form of contemporary idolatry.[33]

Returning, however, to the Bible itself, we find that there are different kinds of gods. That is to say, gods that humans worship other than the living God may be constituted by different things, or may exercise their grip over human lives in different ways. If we are in large measure responsible ourselves as human beings for the gods we create, then it is worth looking at the way the Bible portrays that process. What are the things that we tend to manufacture our gods from?

Things that entice us. "Do not be enticed" warns Deuteronomy 4:19; do not be enticed into worshiping heavenly bodies. The language suggests that there

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[27]J. A. Walter, *A Long Way from Home: A Sociological Exploration of Contemporary Idolatry* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1979).

[28]Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

[29]Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

[30]Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: A Thoughtful, Biblical Look at an Urgent Challenge Facing the Church* (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[31]Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press 1996).

[32]Peter C. Moore, *Disarming the Secular Gods* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989).

[33]Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, ed., *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2000).

are things in creation that are so awe-inspiring, so much beyond our reach, our control or our understanding that they exercise an enticing attraction to us. This is certainly the flavor of the sin that Job claims to have resisted.

> If I have regarded the sun in its radiance
> or the moon moving in splendor,
> so that my heart was secretly enticed
> and my hand offered them a kiss of homage,
> then these also would be sins to be judged,
> for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. (Job 31:26-28)

Psalm 96 recognizes the same temptation.

> For all the gods of the nations are idols,
> but the LORD made the heavens.
> *Splendor and majesty* are before him;
> *strength and glory* are in his sanctuary. (Ps 96:5-6, emphasis added)

The parallelism and flow of thought between these verses implies that the gods worshiped by the nations are personifications of all that impresses us—splendor and majesty, strength and glory. We look for such magnificence and power, and worship these things wherever they inspire awe and trembling admiration: in the stadiums of great sporting triumph or in the lives of pampered sporting heroes; in massed battalions of soldiers, parades of military hardware or on the decks of aircraft carriers; on the stage of rock concerts or the glare of TV and movie celebrity;[34] on the pinnacles of the thrusting towers of corporate power and greed in great cities. All of these can be enticing and idolatrous. But such places, says our psalm, are not where we will find genuine deity. If we are looking for true *splendor, majesty, strength and glory,* they are to be found in the presence of the living Creator God alone. Some commentators see these four words as personifications, as if they were the great angelic companions of YHWH's throne, in stark contrast to the false gods that claimed such magnificence but lacked even real existence.

> I have read v 6 as expressing the great qualities of Yahweh's kingship as personifications, who attend him in the temple (cf. Ps 85:14; 89:15). The entourage of Yahweh is not made up of a company of lesser gods, who are in reality no gods, but those "agents" of his own which are manifest in his saving work and wondrous deeds.[35]

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[34]The language of idolatry is commonly and cheerfully used in that context, in Western culture, when the media pour adulation on celebrities as pop and fashion "idols" and "sex goddesses."
[35]Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100,* Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 514.

Things we fear. The converse is also true. We turn things that we fear into gods in order to placate them or ward them off by our worship. The psalmist affirms that the Lord "is to be feared above all gods" (Ps 96:4), which suggests that gods other than YHWH are indeed things that are objects of fear ("something," in the paradoxical sense discussed on pp. 136-42). So in the Canaanite pantheon Death (Mot) is a god; the Sea (Yamm), another object of awe and fear, is a god. And in other world religions the same phenomenon can be observed—some of the most fearsome faces of evil, anger, vengeance, blood lust, cruelty and so forth are divinized. And many routine ritual practices, such as avoiding "the evil eye," the wearing of protective charms, the use of apotropaic magic and mantras and the like, are manifestations of the deified power of fear. Since there are a great many things in this world for puny human beings to be afraid of, here surely lies one of the roots of polytheistic worldviews.

It is significant, therefore, that the fear of the Lord plays such a central role in the biblical worldview. It is a potent dimension of radical monotheism that if there is truly only one God, then he alone should be the object of our true fear. Then those who live in the fear of the Lord need live in fear of nothing else. Other objects of fear lose their divine power and their idolatrous grip. This is the testimony of the author of Psalm 34.

> I sought the LORD and he answered me;
> he delivered me from all my fears. . . .
> The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,
> and he delivers them.
> Taste and see that the LORD is good;
> blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.
> Fear the LORD, you his saints,
> for those who fear him lack nothing. (Ps 34:4, 7-9)

Or as Nahum Tate put it, "Fear him, ye saints, and you will then / have nothing else to fear."[36]

The idolatrous power of fear is enormous and seems to bear no direct relation to the scale of what is feared. It has been pointed out that although in contemporary Western society we live lives that are immeasurably more safe, healthy and free from risk than any previous generation, yet we are consumed by anxieties, fears and neuroses. Fed by garish media hype, we swoon at the latest rogue virus and seem willing to spend exorbitant amounts on security measures that can never actually prevent the terror we struggle to fend off.

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[36]Nahum Tate, "Through All the Changing Scenes of Life" (1696).

Things that we trust. Following naturally from the previous point, we tend to idolize the things (or people or systems) that we place our trust in to deliver us from the things we fear. The idolatrous dimension emerges when we place ultimate faith in such things, when we believe all the promises that are made or implied in them, and when we make all the sacrifices that they demand in exchange for what they speciously offer. So whether we aim at financial security to insure against all future threats, or pour vast quantities of the wealth of the planet and its nations into the gaping maw of military security, or just become personally obsessive about every latest fad that promises immunity from ill health or the wear and tear of physical ageing, these tend to be very costly gods indeed. And since we spend so much on them, we naturally feel cheated when they do not deliver what we demand in return for our investment. A country can spend billions on star-wars protective systems and then be psychologically devastated by a few knife-wielding men who hijack airplanes. We load blame and anger on health professionals who have not delivered our "entitlement" to disease-free virtual immortality. Ultimately, we pay the cost of putting ultimate trust in what can never deliver ultimate security. Ultimately, it seems, we never learn that false gods never fail to fail. That is the only thing about a false god you can depend on.

By contrast, after magnificent reflections on the sovereign power of the Lord and his word in redemption, creation, providence and history, the author of Psalm 33 warns us against investing our hope for salvation anywhere else.

> No king is saved by the size of his army;
> no warrior escapes by his great strength.
> A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
> despite all its great strength it cannot save. (Ps 33:16-17)

Those whose blessing it is to know the Lord know that the only secure place to deposit one's investment of trust is in the Lord himself, and then to wait in hope, joy and patience for the outcome of his *unfailing* love.

> We wait in hope for the LORD;
> he is our help and shield.
> In him our hearts rejoice,
> for we trust in his holy name.
> May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD,
> even as we put our hope in you. (Ps 33:20-22)

Things we need. "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them" (Mt 6:31-32).

The words of Jesus not only acknowledge the reality of basic human needs but also the way that "pagans run after" them. We are, of course, creatures with the same fundamental needs as the rest of the animals. Like other mammals, we humans need food, air, water, shelter, sleep and all the general necessities of survival and welfare. There is, therefore, a natural tendency to deify the sources from which these necessities are deemed to come. Having turned our back on the sole living Creator of all that provides for our needs, we invent surrogate deities to fill the vacuum. So we attribute the varied good gifts of our one Creator to the varied gods of the rain, the sun, the soil, sex and fertility, dreams, and so on. Much religious effort is then directed at persuading these gods to bestow their largesse in a way that meets human basic needs, or to reverse their apparent decision to withhold their favor. The behavior of the prophets of Baal that fell under Elijah's mockery, in their desperate attempts to persuade Baal to demonstrate his deity, was probably not untypical in such emergencies.

This was part of the burden of Hosea's accusation against Israel—that they were attributing to Baal and the Canaanite cults all the natural processes and products that were the gift of YHWH alone (Hos 2:5-8). But this feature of idolatry also gives a sharper polemical edge to the emphatic insistence in Israel's worship on acknowledging YHWH alone as the source of all that we need. No other god is to be asked for what we need or thanked when we receive it.

> You care for the land and water it;
> you enrich it abundantly.
> The streams of God are filled with water
> to provide the people with grain,
> for so you have ordained it. (Ps 65:9)

> He makes grass grow for the cattle,
> and plants for man to cultivate—
> bringing forth food from the earth:
> wine that gladdens the heart of man,
> oil to make his face shine,
> and bread that sustains his heart. (Ps 104:14-15)

Deuteronomy 8 exposes another subtle form of this idolatry. Failure to acknowledge the living God as the source of all that provides for our needs and contributes to our flourishing can lead to the arrogance that attributes it all to one's own strength and effort. This is also a form of idolatry—the worship of oneself as the source of all that meets one's own need. Whether the Israelite farmer (or modern capitalist) who boasts, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut 8:17), or the Egyptian Pharaoh

(or modern economic superpower) who boasts, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself" (Ezek 29:3), both must recognize the idolatrous nature (and insane arrogance) of such claims and acknowledge the true source of the blessings they enjoy.

A missiological perspective on idolatry, then, must include some analysis of the roots of the gods we make for ourselves. My reflections above suggest some of the ways the Bible itself recognizes what lies behind the things we idolize. Having alienated ourselves from the living God our Creator, we have a tendency to worship whatever makes us tremble with awe as we feel our tiny insignificance in comparison with the great magnitudes that surround us. We seek to placate and ward off whatever makes us vulnerable and afraid. We then counter our fears by investing inordinate and idolatrous trust in whatever we think will give us the ultimate security we crave. And we struggle to manipulate and persuade whatever we believe will provide all our basic needs and enable us to prosper on the planet. Doubtless there are other sources and motivations for endemic human idolatry, but these seem to be some of the primary ones, both observed in the Bible and evident to any observer of contemporary human cultures (whether predominantly religious or secular). And all of them stem from our basic rejection of the living Creator God, before whom all such considerations either evaporate or find their subordinate level of legitimacy.

The only antidote to such idolatries, and therefore the task of biblical mission, is to lead people back to acknowledge the only true and living God in all of these domains. Reviewing our list of the sources of idolatry once more, by way of contrast, the one who has set his glory above the heavens is the only one before whom we should tremble in awe and worship. To live in covenantal fear of the Lord as sovereign Creator and gracious Redeemer is to be delivered from the fear of anything else in all creation—material or spiritual. As the Rock, he is the utterly secure place to invest all our trust in all the circumstances of life and death, for the present and the future. And as the Provider of all that is needful for all life on earth, the God of the covenant with Noah and our heavenly Father, there is no other to whom we need turn, to plead, placate or persuade, for the needs he already knows we have.

Exposing the gods. We have already reflected more than once on the impotence of the gods of human manufacture. False gods fail. That is their only truth. Since the task of mission involves the exposure of false gods, it is worth exploring in more detail some dimensions of this failure. For although false gods never fail to fail, it seems humans never fail to forget that this is indeed the case. Some of the accusations that the Bible lays against idolatry include the following:

Idols deprive God of his proper glory. When human beings attribute to other

gods gifts, powers or functions that belong to the one living God, then God is deprived of the honor that is due to his name alone. The whole creation exists for the glory of the Creator, and in rendering praise to God alone creation (including humanity) experiences its own true blessing and good. This is the meaning of the jealousy of YHWH in the Old Testament. It is God's proper protection of God's own identity and transcendent uniqueness.

> I am the LORD; that is my name!
> I will not give my glory to another
> or my praise to idols. (Is 42:8)

Accordingly the psalmist, having denounced all the gods of the nations as "nothings" (v. 5), issues the universal summons:

> Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,
> ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
> Ascribe to the *LORD* the glory due to *his* name;
> bring an offering and come into *his* courts.
> Worship the *LORD* in the splendor of *his* holiness;
> tremble before *him,* all the earth. (Ps 96:7-9, emphasis added)

This is not an invitation to the nations to make room for YHWH among the pantheon of their own gods and give him some shared respect. The psalmist is not inviting the nations to move their gods along the shelf a little to make room for YHWH among their number. No, this is a call for the radical displacement of all other gods before the sole, unique, transcendent Godness of YHWH, such that all honor, glory, worship and praise goes to him, as it rightfully should. As long as other gods are worshiped, the living God is to that extent denied what is rightfully his—the total worship of his total creation. This is what makes the struggle with idolatry a major dimension of the mission of God in which he commands our cooperation.

Idols distort the image of God in us. Since idolatry diminishes the glory of God, and since humans are made in the image of God, it follows that idolatry is also detrimental to the very essence of our humanity. As the Westminster Confession reminds us, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." To refuse to glorify God, and even worse, to exchange "the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom 1:23) is to frustrate the purpose of our very existence. Idolatry is radical self-harm.

It is also radically, terribly ironic. In trying to be as God (in the original temptation and rebellion), we have ended up less human. The principle affirmed in

several places in the Bible that you become like the object of your worship (e.g., Ps 115:8; Is 41:24; 44:9) is very apparent. If you worship that which is not *God*, you reduce the image of God in yourself. If you worship that which is not even *human,* you reduce your humanity still further.

So Isaiah 44 holds before us very starkly the irony (or parody) of the one creature that was made in the image of the living God worshiping something that is merely a lifeless image of himself.

> The blacksmith takes a tool
> and works with it in the coals;
> he shapes an idol with hammers,
> he forges it with the might of his arm.
> He gets hungry and loses his strength;
> he drinks no water and grows faint.
> The carpenter measures with a line
> and makes an outline with a marker;
> he roughs it out with chisels
> and marks it with compasses.
> He shapes it *in the form of a man,*
> of man in all his glory,
> that it may dwell in a shrine. (Is 44:12-13, emphasis added)

The words in italics are surely the focal point of the prophet's satire. "Man in all his glory" speaks of the human privilege of being made in the image of God. Yet here is a man worshiping as a god something that is nothing but an image of himself, the product of human skill and effort. The lifeless image of the living man languishes inside a little hut, while the living image of the living God is walking around outside, oblivious to the irony of his actions.

There is comparable (though perhaps more polite) irony also in Paul's argument with the Greek intelligentsia in Athens. Few cultures have equalled ancient Greece in exalting the human spirit, human art, literature, philosophy—even the human physical form. Yet in the process they had lost the very God in whose image all these wonderful dimensions of humanity have their source. Was it not absurd, Paul challenges them, to imagine that the One who is the *origin* of all this human glory needed to be housed and fed by human hands?

> The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. . . . Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. (Acts 17:24-25, 29)

The psalms similarly play on the contrast between the work of God's hands and the work of human hands. Human beings, like all the rest of creation, are the work of God's hands (Ps 138:8; 139:13-15). Yet we, unique among God's creatures, have been made "ruler over the works of [God's] hands" (Ps 8:6-8). And when we think about that in the light of contemplating the vastness of the heavens, which are also "the work of [God's] fingers" (Ps 8:3), it is astonishing. So, what a travesty it is when humans, who themselves are the work of God's hands and were made to rule the rest of the works of God's hands, choose instead to worship the work of their *own* hands (Ps 115:4). Without doubt, idolatry distorts, demeans and diminishes our humanity.

Idols are profoundly disappointing. In a polytheistic universe, we cannot expect all the gods to please all the people all the time. So disappointment with the gods is part of the lottery of life. Spread your bets among the gods, then, for you win some, you lose some. The assumption that some of the gods will disappoint you some of the time is actually built into such a worldview, and becomes inevitable when the conflicts of the nations are seen as mirroring the conflicts of the gods. Defeated nations have defeated gods. Threatened nations should face the likelihood of their gods failing them too. Best not to trust them too long. Switch to the gods of the winning side and avoid disappointment.

This is precisely the assumption that seemed gloatingly self-evident to the Assyrian commander swaggering below the walls of besieged Jerusalem.

> Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, "The LORD will deliver us." Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (2 Kings 18:32-35)

In other words, reasoned the Assyrian, YHWH would turn out to be as big a disappointment to the people of Judah as the gods of the other nations had been to them. From where he stood, that seemed a solid, predictable bet. You just can't trust these lesser gods, you see.

Hezekiah and Isaiah, however, had a rather different perspective on events. On the one hand, Hezekiah knew that the reason why the other gods had disappointed the nations that trusted in them was that "they were not gods [or not God], but only wood and stone, fashioned by men's hands" (2 Kings 19:18). And on the other hand, Isaiah knew that Assyria's victories, far from proving the superiority of Assyrian gods, were actually planned and controlled by YHWH all

along, and would very soon be reversed in the fires of his judgment (2 Kings 19:25-28).

No wonder then that the same prophet ridiculed Judah for turning away from the only source of protection that would *not* disappoint them to the armies, horses and gods of the Egyptians, who were notoriously untrustworthy and undoubtedly *would* disappoint them.

> Woe to the obstinate children . . .
> who go down to Egypt
> without consulting me;
> who look for help to Pharaoh's protection,
> to Egypt's shade for refuge.
> But Pharaoh's protection will be your shame,
> Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace. (Is 30:1-3)

> But the Egyptians are men and not God;
> their horses are flesh and not spirit. (Is 31:3; cf. Jer 2:36-37)

Given, then, that the gods of the nations were a disappointing failure even to the nations who worshiped them, and given that YHWH alone was the living God who could be trusted not to fail, it was doubly tragic that Israel should even think of exchanging the one for the other. There was something grossly unnatural about it, as Jeremiah observed in shocked disbelief.

> Has a nation ever changed its gods?
> (Yet they are not gods at all.)
> But my people have exchanged their Glory
> for worthless idols.
> Be appalled at this, O heavens,
> and shudder with great horror. (Jer 2:11-12)

How could anyone abandon a guaranteed source of life for a guaranteed source of disappointment? Yet that is what Israel had done, in forsaking the living spring for a leaking cistern. "Broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer 2:13) is a powerful image of disappointment, futility and wasted effort.

The Lord himself then chides Israel for the ungrateful futility of their folly. Drawing from the ancient tradition of Deuteronomy 32:37-38, Jeremiah depicts the perversity of Israel in turning away from YHWH to worship despicable gods, but then brazenly expecting YHWH to save them when the multiple gods of their own manufacture utterly fail to deliver.

> They say to wood, "You are my father,"
> and to stone, "You gave me birth."

They have turned their backs to me
and not their faces;
yet when they are in trouble, they say,
"Come and save us!"
Where then are the gods you made for yourselves?
Let them come if they can save you
when you are in trouble!
For you have as many gods
as you have towns, O Judah. (Jer 2:27-28)[37]

Kings, armies, horses, treaties, riches, natural resources—all these things are *not* really gods and are unable to bear the weight of trust we put in them. However, what makes them into gods is that we insist on believing the spurious promises they make (or that we implicitly attribute to them). We keep on paying the enormous sacrifices they demand for our loyalty. And we keep on hoping against hope that they will not let us down. But of course, they always do in the end. Idolatry is wasted effort and dashed hopes. The worship of false gods is the fellowship of futility, the grand delusion whose only destiny is disappointment.

So when the editorial in a British national newspaper once ended its sad analysis of a society in which two children could callously murder a toddler with the words "All our gods have failed," it doubtless intended the words only as a figure of speech.[38] Sadly, such a metaphorical cry of despair also precisely captures the spiritual truth. Those things that we thought could deliver us from evil and in which we invested great amounts of intellectual, financial and emotional capital in the hope that they would deliver us, have instead spectacularly disappointed us. When will we ever learn?

Remembering that the battle is the Lord's. Johannes Verkuyl writes:

> The whole Old Testament (and the New Testament as well) is filled with descriptions of how YHWH-Adonai, the covenant God of Israel, is waging war against those forces that try to thwart and subvert his plans for his creation. He battles against those false gods that human beings have fashioned from the created world, idolized and used for their own purpose. Think, for example, of the Baals and the Ashteroth, whose worshipers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to a divine status. God fights against magic and astrology that, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation. He contends against every form

[37]In v. 27 Jeremiah scornfully reverses the "gender" of the idolatry here: the wooden pole was the female maternity symbol, while the standing stone was the male phallic symbol.

[38]From the editorial "It Must Be Someone's Fault—It Might Be Our Own," *The Independent,* February 28, 1993, in the wake of the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-old children.

of social injustice and pulls off every cloak under which it seeks to hide.[39]

The Bible clearly portrays the struggle with idolatry as a battle between YHWH, the living God, and all those forces that oppose him. Verkuyl mentions the gods of the Canaanite cults, but we could equally think of the great battle with the unnamed gods of Egypt in the exodus narrative (cf. Ex 12:12) that preceded Israel's life in Canaan, or of the sustained rhetorical polemic against the gods of Babylon in the context of Israel's exile, in the book of Isaiah.[40]

Now that we have surveyed the dismal devastation that idolatry wreaks in human life, we can see this conflict between God and the gods in a fresh light. Three points of missional relevance may be made.

The missional love of God repels idolatry. On the one hand, it is true that God battles with idolatry because it diminishes the glory that is rightfully God's own. God's jealousy for God's own self is a powerful dynamic throughout Scripture. But, on the other hand, God's battle against the gods of human hands (and all they represent) can be seen as a function of his *loving benevolence toward us* and indeed toward his whole creation. Divine jealousy is in fact an essential function of divine love. It is precisely because God wills our good that he hates the self-inflicted harm that our idolatry generates. God's conflict with the gods is ultimately for our own good as well as for God's glory. This further highlights why idolatry is such a primary sin in the Bible—identified as such by the primacy of the first two commandments of the Decalogue. It is not merely that idolatry steals God's glory but it also thwarts God's love—the love that seeks the highest good of all God's creation. Idolatry therefore contradicts the very essence, the Godness, of God, for "God is love."

Once again, it is important to take note of a strongly missional hermeneutic in our discussion. We are not approaching this matter from the perspective of an attempted reconstruction of the evolution of Israel's religion, nor merely from the perspective of the religious psychology of those who worshiped other gods. We remind ourselves constantly that the primary driving force of the biblical grand narrative is the priority of God's own mission. Israel's religion at the em-

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[39]Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 95. See also, as a serious treatment of conflict as an essential element of mission in biblical thought, Marc R. Spindler, *La Mission: Combat Pour Le Salut Du Monde* (Neuchatel, Switzerland: Delachaux & Niestle, 1967).

[40]Robert B. Chisholm also observes these three broadly significant eras in the conflict between Yahweh and the gods, and then concentrates on the latter two. See, " 'To Whom Shall You Compare Me?' Yahweh's Polemic Against Baal and the Babylonian Idol-Gods in Prophetic Literature," in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions,* ed. E. Rommen and H. A. Netland (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1995), pp. 56-71.

pirical level of popular practice seems to have ebbed and flowed in terms of its commitment to the monotheistic dynamic within it, and more often than not succumbed to ambient polytheism. But the canon as a whole bears witness to the constant determination of the living God, in transcendent uniqueness and universality, to defeat and destroy all that seduces human beings away from the love they receive from God and the love they should give to God.

God's battle with the gods is an essential part of God's mission. God's mission is the blessing of the nations. And the blessing of the nations must ultimately include ridding them of gods that masquerade as protectors and saviors, but are actually devouring, destroying, disappointing deceptions. The battle to do so is a battle of divine love.

The battle and the victory belong to God. Second, by putting our emphasis again on the mission of God, not on human mission, we preserve the right biblical perspective on this matter. For we need to be clear that in the Bible *the conflict with the gods is a conflict waged by God for us, not a conflict waged by us for God.* To be sure, the people of God are involved in spiritual warfare, as countless texts in both testaments testify. However, it is assuredly *not* the case that God is waiting anxiously for the day when we finally win the battle for him and the heavens can applaud our great victory. Such blasphemous nonsense, however, is not far removed from the rhetoric and practice of some forms of alleged mission that place great store on all kinds of methods and techniques of warfare by which we are urged to identify and defeat our spiritual enemies. No, the overwhelming emphasis of the Bible is that *we* are the ones who wait in hope for the day when God defeats all the enemies of God and his people, and then we will celebrate *God's* victory along with angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. Indeed, in the company of heaven we already celebrate the victory of the cross and resurrection of Christ, the Easter victory that anticipates the final destruction of all God's enemies.

God fights for us, not we for him. We are called to witness, to struggle, to resist, to suffer. But the battle is the Lord's, as is the final victory.

Our battle is fought with love, not triumphalism. Third, insofar as our mission assuredly also includes the dimension of spiritual warfare, we need to recognize that our primary aim is not to "win" but to serve. That is to say, the idols, gods, demons and spiritual powers against which we declare war in the name of the gospel of Christ and his cross are things that oppress and ravage human existence. False gods destroy and devour lives, health and resources; they distort and diminish our humanity; they preside over injustice, greed, perversion, cruelty, lust and violence. It is possibly the most satanic dimension of their deceptive power that, in spite of all this, they still persuade people that they are the beneficent protec-

tors of their worshipers' identity, dignity and prosperity, and must therefore be defended at all costs. Only the gospel can unmask these claims. Only the gospel exposes the cancer of idolatry. Only the gospel is good for people.

Our missional motivation, therefore, needs to be carefully examined. Spiritual warfare is not a matter of triumphalism pervaded by a horrid spirit of gloating superiority, in which we become obsessed with "winning a victory." Rather it is a matter of deep compassion for those oppressed by the forces of evil and idolatry—with all their attendant social, economic, political, spiritual and personal effects. We battle with idolatry because, like the God whose mission we thereby share, we know that in doing so we seek the best interests of those we are called to serve in his name. We combat idolatry not only to glorify God but also to bless humanity. Spiritual warfare, like all forms of biblical mission, is to be motivated by and exercised with profound love, humility and compassion—as modeled in Jesus himself.

Confronting Idolatry

Combating idolatry can take many forms. The Bible itself prepares us to recognize that different approaches may be relevant in different contexts. Wisdom in mission calls us to be discerning and to recognize that what may be appropriate in one situation may not be so helpful in another. Within the ministry of the apostle Paul, for example, we may observe the different approach adopted when, for example, (1) he tackles idolatry in the context of dense theological argument of an epistle and (2) he is confronting it in evangelistic engagement with the worshipers of other gods, and again (3) he is wrestling pastorally with questions raised within the church about surrounding idolatry. And to these we may add the prophetic conflict with idolatry, which exposes its futility but does so primarily for the ears of the people of God.

Theological argument. Writing to Christians, and speaking of idolatry objectively as a phenomenon, Paul pulls no punches. In his sharp analysis of human rebellion against God in Romans 1:18-32, he sets idolatry firmly within the realm of that which incurs the wrath of God. It is the result of deliberate suppression of the truth about God that is known and available to all humans. It involves the inversion of the creation order, exchanging the worship of the living God for the worship of images of creation. It claims wisdom but is rank folly. It issues in a catalog of vice and viciousness, polluting every aspect of human life—sexual, social, familial and personal. Idolatry is alienating, darkening, degrading, divisive and deadly. We must not separate any part of this analysis from the whole. Paul's attack on idolatry is theological, intellectual, spiritual, ethical

and social. It is a powerful piece of theological argument, preparatory to his exposition of the fullness of the gospel.

Mission requires that we engage in such discourse when appropriate, for we have no liberty to dilute the lurid colors of Paul's exposure of idolatry here. This is the truth of the matter, the distillation of so many other biblical texts on the subject. The good news of the gospel has to be seen (as it very soon is in Romans) against the horrendously bad news of what human addiction to idolatry actually is. However, to repeat: the context here is tight theological argument, the prelude to Paul's full exposition of the gospel as "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew and then for the Gentile" (Rom 1:16). These words are written by Paul *to Christians,* as words of teaching and warning.

Evangelistic engagement. The book of Acts gives us three glimpses of Paul in direct contact with pagan worshipers of the gods of the Greek culture:

- Lystra (Acts 14:8-20)
- Athens (Acts 17:16-34)
- Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41)

The circumstances were very different in each location, but there are some interesting common features.

In *Lystra,* the healing of a cripple led to Barnabas and Paul being hailed as the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes in human form, and a sacrifice being prepared in their honor. Paul countered with strong protestations of their own mere humanity and followed this with an appeal that the crowd should turn from "these worthless things" (v. 15) to the one living God, creator of heaven and earth, who had been giving them all the good things of life.

In *Athens,* discussions with some philosophers about Jesus and the resurrection led to a summons before the city authorities, the Areopagus, to submit his teaching to their inspection. This hearing was probably not merely a matter of polite curiosity but a public inquiry. Introducing new gods into Athens (as they thought Paul was trying to do) was not a problem religiously, but it had to be controlled by the civic authorities, to ensure that (1) claimed deities actually had some track record to their name and (2) the sponsor could afford to set up a temple, provide the sacrifices, pay the priests and so on.[41] Paul's speech stands this civic protocol on its head. The God he represented was not subject to human accreditation by the Athenian authorities but rather sat in judgment on

[41]For this reading of the situation in Acts 17 see Bruce Winter, "On Introducing Gods to Athens: An Alternative Reading of Acts 17:18-20," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 71-90.

them. Far from needing the services of human attendants for housing and feeding, it was this God who provided these things and much more for the whole human race.

In *Ephesus,* two years of systematic public lecturing (Acts 19:9-10) accompanied by remarkable healing miracles (Acts 19:11-12) led to a growth of truly converted believers (Acts 19:17-20). So many people were turning to the living God through faith in Christ that the bottom began to drop out of the market for the idol industry in the city (Acts 19:23-27). We have no direct record of Paul's teaching, but Luke summarizes it in the mouth of Demetrius: "He [Paul] says that man-made gods are no gods at all" (Acts 19:26).

The monotheistic message of the gospel thus challenged popular superstition in Lystra, intellectual and civic pride in Athens and economic interests in Ephesus. The thrust of Paul's evangelistic tactics in such circumstances—that is, when engaging directly with idol-worshiping pagans as distinct from offering theological teaching to established believers—is forthright and uncompromising but markedly softer and more polite than the language we observed in Romans 1.

In the two recorded speeches (in Lystra and Athens), Paul emphasises God as the one living Creator of heaven and earth (Acts 13:15; 17:24). In both he stresses the providence of God in giving humans all the necessities of life, even life and breath itself (Acts 13:17; 17:25). In Lystra he offers this as evidence of the kindness of God, bringing joy even to pagans; in Athens he offers it as proof that God longs for people to seek him, though he is in fact not far from any of us (supporting this from pagan poetry [Acts 17:27-28]). In both places, he allows that God has been patient and tolerant of pagan ignorance in the past (Acts 13:16; 17:30). But in both he also calls for a decisive turning away from the worship of "worthless things" (Acts 13:15), which are hopelessly inadequate for the divine being (Acts 17:29). This is consistent with his own testimony regarding the burden of his preaching in Thessalonica. He recalls how pagans there had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9). In Athens, he goes on to speak of judgment and to link it to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 17:31).

What we learn from the lips of the pagans themselves in Ephesus is that Paul had argued that "man-made gods" are not gods at all (Acts 19:26—a thoroughly Old Testament perspective). But what we also learn most interestingly is that Paul had *not* engaged in specific defamation of Artemis/Diana—the patron goddess of Ephesus. This is not even a claim Paul makes for himself but is stated in his defense by the city clerk to pacify the riot fomented against Paul and his friends: "They have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess" (Acts 19:37). Clearly Paul's evangelism was uncompromisingly effective but it was not calculatingly offensive.

Comparing Paul's *theological* argument to Christians in Romans 1 with his *evangelistic* preaching to pagans recorded in Acts, there is a marked difference of tone, even though there is certainly no clash of fundamental conviction.

Romans, written to Christians, highlights the wrath of God. Acts, referring to speeches made to pagans, highlights God's kindness, providence and patience. Both, however, insist on God's judgment.

- Romans portrays idolatry as fundamentally rebellion and suppression of the truth. Acts portrays it as ignorance.
- Romans portrays the wickedness that idolatry spawns. Acts portrays idolatry as "worthless."
- Romans points out how perverted the idolater's thinking has to be. Acts points out how absurd it is when you stop and think about it.
- Paul could excoriate idolatry as "a lie" before Christian readers, but did not blaspheme Artemis before her pagan worshipers.

So there is a difference in tone and tactic in Paul's confrontation with idolatry, depending on the context of his argument. However, we should be clear that in both cases, he is building all he has to say on very solid scriptural foundations, for every one of the points mentioned above, even though they have differing and balancing emphases, can be related to the Old Testament's rhetoric against idolatry. It is particularly noteworthy that although Paul nowhere quotes Old Testament texts in his evangelistic preaching among Gentiles (as he so profusely does when speaking among Jews in synagogues), the content of his message is thoroughly grounded in and plainly proclaims the monotheistic creational faith of Israel.

Pastoral guidance. Those who came to faith in Christ out of a background of Greco-Roman polytheism embraced the biblical monotheistic worldview. But they still lived surrounded by all the idolatrous reality of the culture within which they were now called to live out their Christian identity. This posed daily dilemmas for them. The thoroughness of Paul's mission practice is that he was not content merely with evangelism and church planting but was concerned to build mature communities of believers who could think biblically through the ethical issues they faced in the ambient religious culture. His pastoral and ethical guidance to his churches was thus as much part of his missional task as his evangelistic zeal, and just as theologically grounded too.

First Corinthians 8—10 is the prime text on this matter. How were Christians to act in relation to meat that had been sacrificed to idols? The nub of the issue for the Corinthians was not primarily *theological* clarification: it seems the Corin-

thians knew their theology since Paul assumes it by way of reminder in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. Nor was it primarily *evangelistic:* the Corinthians had already come to faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:1-9). But it was certainly *pastoral and ethical,* since there were divisions within the church on the matter and some members were being hurt and offended while others were being arrogant and reckless.

We have already discussed the passage in some depth around the question "are gods and idols something or nothing?" so we need not go over that ground again. However, it is worth recalling that there were two aspects to the problem, and Paul gives distinct answers to each of them. Both have a bearing on how Christians deal with the practical problems of ambient idolatry.

On the one hand, there was *the ordinary meat market.* Animals were slaughtered in sacrificial rituals to various gods and then the meat would end up on the butcher's slab in the market. Could Christians buy such meat in the market and serve it up without endorsing the prior idolatry involved in its production? Paul's answer is, in general terms, "Yes, you may. The gods and idols have no real existence; meat is a good gift of God the Creator and can be enjoyed in thankfulness to him." The only exception to this freedom is if it causes offense to someone else at the table—in which case you should refrain out of respect for that other person's more tender conscience. The rule of love takes precedence over the freedom one legitimately has. Apart from that restriction, "eat anything sold in the meat market" is Paul's down to earth advice (1 Cor 10:25).

But on the other hand, there were the meals that were hosted actually within the precincts of *the temples of the gods,* often as civic functions or as social events put on by wealthier citizens. These were opportunities for securing patronage, making advantageous deals and fitting in with the social expectations of the Corinthian elite. Since these involved actual participation in the sacrifices in the temples of the gods (as distinct from simply going to the butcher's stall and buying the meat that was a byproduct of the sacrifice), Paul would not endorse Christians attending such events.

Paul knew full well the negative social consequences for Christians of such self-exclusion from gatherings at the temples. They would not merely be seen to be negligent or offensive to the city's gods, they would also miss out on opportunities for social networking and very likely endanger their relationship with patrons and employers. But Paul was adamant. Stay away. First of all, attendance at such feasts in the temples, even done with full theological knowledge of their "emptiness," poses a far greater threat to the conscience of the weaker brother who sees you doing it, and is therefore sinning against Christ who died for him (1 Cor 8:10-13). But second, even though the idols and sacrifices are "nothing" in any divine sense, they can certainly be doorways to the

demonic. Christians cannot mix participation in the body and blood of Christ with participation in the feasts of demons (1 Cor 10:14-22). For that reason Paul's advice on *this* part of the question is simple: "flee from idolatry"—that is, do not allow any suspicion that you are participating in it, even if you have your internal theological defenses up. Stay away.

The subtlety and sensitivity with which Paul constructs the pastoral and ethical application of his theology (i.e., the missiological implications of radical monotheism in the context of a powerful cultural polytheism) is very illuminating. It surely has much to offer to Christians in many different religious and cultural contexts, caught in the pressure between theological conviction and social conventions.

In contexts where other named gods are explicitly worshiped, Christians may have to distinguish between the byproducts of rituals associated with those gods and actual participation in the worship of them. Some Christians in India, for example, feel free to accept *prasad*—the gifts of sweets or fruits from those who have celebrated a birthday or other event by offering something first to the gods in their home or place of work, but they are not willing to join in actual rituals or to participate in multifaith worship, or anything that explicitly affirmed the reality of other gods. Other Indian Christians would exclude both for fear of misleading "the weaker brother."

In the West, gods and idols take more subtle forms, but similar issues may arise. Gambling, for example, could certainly be conceived as a form of idolatry to the god of mammon, with all the tendency to addiction that most idolatries feed. For that reason most Christians refuse to engage in it or intentionally to set out to profit from it either by participating in gambling (e.g., state lotteries) or by requesting money from the organizers of such lotteries. On the other hand, if someone who wins the lottery chooses, unasked, to give some of the money to the church or a Christian charity, there are those who would argue that such money can be accepted without raising questions of conscience, since all wealth belongs to the Lord in the first place. You are not participating in the evil of gambling by accepting such a gift, even though it was the product of gambling, any more than a Corinthian was participating in idolatry by buying meat at the butcher's shop, even though it was produced in an idolatrous ritual. Disagreement on this among Western Christians is as likely as that over *prasad* among Indian Christians.

Doubtless many other examples of the outworking of Paul's pastoral and ethical guidelines could be discussed. My point is that his handling of the matter in a pastoral context among new Christian believers has a different feel to either his evangelistic engagement with unbelievers or his theological invective in a

strongly didactic context for mature Christians. Perhaps we have something to learn from Paul in the way we confront idolatry in our own multiple contexts.

Prophetic warning. The pastoral approach that we have just been considering involves helping God's people to cope with the dilemmas of living in a culture in which idolatry is endemic. The prophetic approach, however, involves identifying, exposing and denouncing the idolatry itself. But it is noteworthy that where this happens in the Bible it is normally for the ears of God's people. In evangelistic contexts in the New Testament, there is unambiguous repudiation of the polytheistic worldview, but we do not find public denunciation of specific gods or offensive mockery of their worshipers. And in the Old Testament, in the few places where an Israelite addresses pagan nations, the condemnation is typically targeted at their moral and social wickedness, not at their worship of the wrong gods (even though the two are connected). Examples of this might include Amos's catalog of the sins of the nations surrounding Israel (Amos 1:1—2:3, noticeably Amos only specifies worship of false gods when he gets round to Judah in Amos 2:4), and Jonah's condemnation of Nineveh, which is explicitly aimed at "its wickedness" and "their violence," not their gods (Jonah 1:2; 3:8). Elijah's mockery of the prophets of Baal should not be seen as the mockery of ignorant pagans, for many of them were actually apostates from Yahwism. Their main offense was in leading the people into their own idolatrous confusion.

However, no rhetorical device is redundant when prophetic voices address their denunciation of idolatry *to the people of God themselves*. We need only recall the penetrating polemic of Isaiah 40—48, the similar arguments of Jeremiah 10, or the warnings of Deuteronomy 4. What is the reason for this heavy imbalance? Of course it was true that idolatry was to be avoided for fear of incurring the jealous wrath of the living God. (Paul was no stranger to that argument either [1 Cor 10:22].) But prophets also exposed the futility of idolatry in order *to release God's people from undue fear of the gods of nations* that seemed more powerful. This is obvious in Isaiah 40—48. It is also Jeremiah's motivation:

> Do not learn the ways of the nations
> or be terrified by signs in the sky,
> though the nations are terrified by them. . . .
> Like a scarecrow in a melon patch
> their idols cannot speak;
> they must be carried
> because they cannot walk.
> Do not fear them;
> they can do no harm
> nor can they do any good. (Jer 10:2, 5)

Prophets also denounce the gods of the nations because they know that ultimately Israel will only be disappointed and humiliated if they go after them. Warning God's people against idolatry is for their own protection. The cost is too high—as Israel in exile discovered, through the retrospective explanations of Ezekiel.

It would not be out of place to include Romans 1:18-32 in this company, for Paul's searing exposure of the perverse roots and bitter fruit of idolatry stands in the same prophetic tradition. Like the prophets of old, Paul summons the redeemed to see idolatry from God's point of view and to recognize the appalling truth about what they have been redeemed from.

Ephesus again provides an interesting case study. Acts reveals that Paul preached the gospel in Ephesus, and many people there turned from idolatry and sorcery to the living God. In the course of that church-planting program, Paul did not indulge in public defamation of Artemis (according to the secular authorities). Yet in writing later to those new believers in Ephesus who had chosen to turn away from their worship of Artemis and trust in Christ, Paul did not hesitate to remind them of their perilous spiritual state *before* they came to faith in Christ. They had been alienated from Israel, from Israel's Messiah, Israel's covenant hope and Israel's God. In fact, in an ironic turn of phrase, Paul says that these Ephesians, with all their many gods, had in fact been *atheoi*—"without God," inasmuch as they had no knowledge of or relationship with the true and living God (Eph 2:12). Later, he again reminds them of the kind of life they had been rescued from—a life characterized by those things Paul elsewhere so closely linked with idolatry in Romans 1 (futility, darkness, hardness, sensual indulgence, etc. [Eph 4:17-19]). Part of Paul's purpose in writing thus is to remind believers of the moral and spiritual darkness of idolatry, to warn them against ever going back to it and to encourage them to live the distinctive holy life of the redeemed. It seems that Paul attacked idolatry much more fiercely in discipling those who had been delivered from it than he did in his public evangelistic ministry among those still involved in it.

In what way is this prophetic warning to the people of God against idolatry in both Testaments missiologically significant? The answer again lies in appreciating the mission of God in and through God's people. God's goal of blessing the nations requires not only that the nations eventually come to abandon their gods and bring their worship before the living God alone (as envisioned, e.g., in Ps 96 and many prophetic visions). God's mission also requires that God's own people in the meantime should preserve the purity and exclusiveness of their worship of the living God, and resist the adulterating syncretisms that surround them. An obedient and covenantally loyal Israel would be seen by the

nations and the result would be praise and glory to YHWH the living God (Deut 4:6-8; 28:9-10). A disobedient and idolatrous Israel would bring disgrace on YHWH and drag his name through the gutters of profanity among the nations (Deut 29:24-28; Ezek 36:16-21). In other words, more is at stake in keeping God's people away from idols than their own spiritual health. God's own mission for the sake of the nations is also on the line.

Jeremiah, with his customary graphic imagery, captured both sides of this perception of the mission of Israel in a single piece of prophetic acted symbolism (Jer 13:1-11). As a beautiful piece of clothing brings honor and praise to the one who wears it, so God had bound Israel to himself "to be my people for my renown and praise and honor."[42] This triplet of words is the same as that which God had promised Israel would have among the nations (Deut 26:19). Whatever renown may accrue to God's people through their loyalty and obedience to him is ultimately for the honor and glory of God himself. That is the missiological dynamic. But the effect of Israel's idolatry (specified in Jer 13:10) is to make them like a beautiful piece of cloth that has been buried in wet soil for a long time—"ruined and completely useless" (vv. 7, 10). God cannot "wear" people who are sodden and soiled with the rotting rags of idolatry. How can God draw the nations away from the worship of false gods if the people he has chosen to be a blessing to the nations are themselves riddled with those gods? The scorching severity of the warnings against idolatry, then, are not just for the benefit of God's own people but ultimately, through them, for the benefit of the nations. That is their missional relevance.

Conclusion

What have we seen in this chapter concerning the missiological dimension of the Bible's polemic against idolatry?

We have seen the paradox that although gods and idols are *something* in the world, they are *nothing* in comparison to the living God.

We have seen that while gods and idols may be implements of or gateways to the world of the demonic, the overwhelming verdict of Scripture is that they are the work of human hands, constructs of our own fallen and rebellious imagination.

We have also seen that the primal problem with idolatry is that it blurs the distinction between the Creator God and the creation. This both damages creation (including ourselves) and diminishes the glory of the Creator.

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[42]This is an unusual but richly meaningful metaphor for the covenant relationship. In its intimacy and mutuality, it is like the bond between a person and a favorite piece of clothing that is bound affectionately to one's body. The covenant is God wearing his people.

Since God's mission is to restore creation to its full original purpose of bringing all glory to God himself and thereby to enable all creation to enjoy the fullness of blessing that he desires for it, God battles against all forms of idolatry and calls us to join him in that conflict.

A biblically informed missional approach to idolatry, however, seeks to understand the great variety of ways that human beings make gods for themselves, the variety of forms those gods take and the variety of motivations behind our worship of them.

Then we need to understand the whole breadth of the Bible's exposure of the deleterious effects of idolatry in order to appreciate its seriousness and the reason for the Bible's passionate rhetoric about it.

Finally, in confronting idolatry, we need to be discerning about what responses are appropriate in different contexts, learning from the apostles and prophets as we do so.

All of these tasks need to be carried on not only in the light of the wide range of biblical texts, such as those we have touched on in this and the previous chapter, but also in relation to specific cultural and religious contexts and their particular manifestations of the human addiction to idolatry. The prophets and apostles set us the clear example of both claiming universality and transcendence for YHWH and Christ, while at the same time engaging with cutting relevance in the particular and local contexts into which they were sent. Our mission demands no less.