

PART III THE PEOPLE OF MISSION

Having completed our study of the themes at the apex of our structural diagram (see p. 28) under the heading of the “The God of Mission” and the dynamic interpenetration of biblical monotheism and biblical mission, we now move round to the next corner of the triangle—“The People of Mission.”

Popular understanding of Christian mission would tend to locate its origin more or less simultaneously with the origin of the Christian church. Didn't Jesus say that his disciples should wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit before setting off to preach repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the earth? And didn't the coming of the Holy Spirit also launch the church at Pentecost? The two things are joined by verbal Velcro in the way Luke ends his Gospel and begins the Acts of the Apostles.

This instinctive conjunction of ecclesiology and missiology is valid, of course, but any reader who has not just joined our journey at this point will not be surprised to hear that the link must be traced much further back than Pentecost but right back into the Old Testament. The New Testament church may have been birthed that day, but the people of God in history go back to Abraham. And as Paul was fond of pointing out to all and sundry, any person of any nation who is in Christ is thereby also in Abraham.

So as we turn to think of the people whom God has called and created to be the agent of his mission, that is where we must begin too. Arguably God's covenant with Abraham is the single most important biblical tradition within a biblical theology of mission and a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. We are going to see that it generates a vast, arching, trajectory that carries us from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. So it well deserves the two chapters afforded to it here. First we explore in chapter six the meaning of God's election of Abraham and his descendants as the vehicle of blessing to the nations, and what is entailed in that original great commission. Then in chapter seven we trace the paradoxical

duality of the covenant's universality (it is for the blessing of all nations) and particularity (it is by means of one nation). Both poles of the paradox have important missional implications.

Moving along the pathway of the Bible's grand narrative we come to the exodus. Theologically we move from election to redemption. Missiologically we move from the man for all nations (Abraham) to the people redeemed to be God's priesthood in the midst of the nations (Israel). The exodus stands as the primary model of God's redemption in history, and chapter eight explores its rich multidimensional relevance. But even a redeemed people still live on this planet and are susceptible to the social and economic effects of human fallenness. God's law takes this into account, and the jubilee year provides an example of God's comprehensive concern for human well-being through restorative mechanisms. Chapter nine explores its rationale and missiological implications, and takes it as a case study for reflection on holistic mission.

The people of God are constituted within a covenant relationship with him. This too is an overarching biblical theme that provides a skeletal framework for the Bible's grand narrative. Chapter ten surveys the span of the great covenant articulations from Noah to Christ and asks how they affect our understanding of the mission of God.

Having been chosen, redeemed and called into covenant relationship, the people of God have a life to live—a distinctive, holy, ethical life that is to be lived before God and in the sight of the nations. This too has crucial missional relevance, for as we will see in chapter eleven there is no biblical mission without biblical ethics.

This then is the unifying theme of the six chapters in this part of our book—the people of God, created and commissioned for the mission of God.

God's Elect People

Chosen for Blessing

If only all the theological disputes in Christian history had been caused by successful mission and rapid church growth. Undoubtedly the first dispute was. The first major council of the church (Acts 15) was convened to consider a knot of problems caused by the success of crosscultural church planting efforts. These had been initiated by the church of Antioch and carried out among the predominantly Gentile and ethnically diverse peoples of the Roman provinces that made up what we now call Turkey. Paul and Barnabas, who had been entrusted with this initiative, were not the first to cross the barrier from Jew to Gentile with the good news of Jesus Christ. Philip (Acts 8) and Peter (Acts 10) had already done that. They were, however, the first to establish whole communities of believers, from mixed Jewish and Gentile backgrounds—that is, to plant multiethnic churches. And furthermore, they had clearly been teaching these new believers that they now belonged fully to the people of God otherwise known as Israel—but without going through the process of becoming Jewish proselytes.

What exactly was Paul preaching? And why did it cause such consternation to some and even violent opposition from others?

Paul's Gospel

Paul's preaching was in essence the message we have been exploring in part two. From Luke's record of Paul's evangelistic preaching in Acts, and from the references in his own letters to the message he had brought to the churches he had planted, it is clear that Paul taught that

- There is only one supreme God, who has made himself known through creation and in the story of Israel.

- All other gods are false human constructs that do not provide for human needs and cannot achieve human salvation.
- The one living God has sent his own Son, Jesus of Nazareth, in fulfillment of his promise to Israel.
- Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has opened the way for people of all nations to find salvation, forgiveness and eternal life.
- Through faith in Jesus, God's appointed Savior and King, people of any nation can now belong to the redeemed people of God, and be found among the righteous when God would intervene again through Jesus in the approaching day of final judgment.
- This conversion through repentance and faith in Jesus was all that was needed to belong to God's covenant people.

This powerful message that brought hope and joy to diverse Gentile communities brought shock and anger to some of Paul's fellow Jews. Surely, they argued, it is clear from the Scriptures that the one living God has chosen Israel for salvation. Only those who belong to the elect and covenant people of Israel can be among the righteous and can expect to be safe in the day of God's wrath. Belonging to Israel necessarily involves being circumcised and observing the Torah of Moses, particularly those laws that most visibly demonstrate the distinctiveness of Jews from the rest of the world—the laws governing clean and unclean areas of life (especially food), and observance of the sabbath. If these Gentiles want to join the camp of the righteous and be assured of salvation, then they must effectively become Jews, through circumcision and careful keeping of the law of Moses. If they want the benefits of the covenant, they must join the people of the covenant and obey the rules of the covenant. They must follow the established path of becoming a proselyte Jew.

Not all of those who opposed Paul in this way were Jews who had *rejected* Jesus as Messiah (as Paul had done before his Damascus road experience) and who were consequently fired with violent hostility to all things Christian (as Paul had been also). There were Christian believers also from staunch Jewish backgrounds—some of them Pharisees like Paul—who had the same problem with Gentile conversions. Faith in Jesus was all very well, they argued, but it did not remove the fundamental scriptural criteria for covenant membership.

So Luke records the basic clash as it developed in the early church in response to the success of the Gentile mission. On the one hand, the church in Antioch rejoiced when Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey “and reported all that God had done through them and how he had

opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). But on the other hand: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'"¹ When the council to resolve the dispute was convened in Jerusalem, we read, "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (Acts 15:1, 5).

Luke's account in Acts records Peter's, Paul's and Barnabas's involvement in that council, and finally the decisive, Scripture-based ruling of James. Paul's own theological answer to the issue is given in more colorful terms in his letter to the Galatian church, which had clearly been troubled by people persuasively peddling the same message.² This group challenged Paul's assurance that faith in the Messiah Jesus was sufficient for saving membership in God's people.

"But what about Moses?" they cried.

"Never mind Moses; what about Abraham?" Paul answered.

They thought they had clinching scriptural backing for their case. Paul trumped their appeal by taking them even further back and showing the priority of God's promise to Abraham. For both Paul and his opponents, the matter was one of scriptural authority. They both agreed that whatever mission strategy was adopted by the church must be compatible with the Scriptures (for them, what we call the Old Testament).³ Paul offered a fresh hermeneutic that observed the priority of Abraham—chronologically and theologically—in the texts.

So in a classic passage, Paul combines four things:

- the promise of God
- the faith of Abraham
- the universal mission of God to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham
- the saving implications for all who have faith like Abraham

And *this*, says Paul—this dynamic narrative of God's saving purpose for all nations through Abraham—is the heart of *the gospel* as announced by the Scriptures.

¹So presumably these people were bona fide Christian "brothers" themselves, though Paul had a more negative view of some of them, at least (Gal 2:4).

²The historical relationship between the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians is a matter of continued scholarly dispute, which can be explored in the major New Testament introductions and commentaries.

³It is ironic how far we have moved from this early difficulty. For many contemporary Christians the problem lies with the Old Testament. For these early Christians the Old Testament was the given Word of God; the problem lay with the church. Our question so often is, Is the Old Testament really Christian? Their question was, Is the church scriptural (i.e., consistent with the Old Testament)?

Consider Abraham: “He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal 3:6-9)

So the Gentile mission, Paul argued, far from being a betrayal of the Scriptures, was rather the fulfillment of them. The ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfillment of the bottom line of God’s promise to Abraham. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and since the Messiah embodied in his own person the identity and mission of Israel, then to belong to the Messiah through faith was to belong to Israel. And to belong to Israel was to be a true child of Abraham, no matter what a person’s ethnicity is, for “If you belong to Christ [the Messiah], then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

We will come back later to the wider missional implications of Paul’s understanding of the gospel, but for the moment, we will respond more fully to his invitation to “consider Abraham.”

Consider Abraham

Genesis 12:1-3—A pivotal text. The word Paul describes as “the gospel in advance” (“all nations will be blessed through you”) is first heard in Genesis 12:3. It is the climax of God’s promise to Abraham. It is also a pivotal text not only in the book of Genesis but indeed in the whole Bible. So important is it in Genesis that it occurs five times altogether, with minor variations of phraseology (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5; 28:14).⁴ Clearly, therefore, it is not just an afterthought tacked on to the end of God’s promise to Abraham but a key element of it. *Blessing for the nations is the bottom line, textually and theologically, of God’s promise to Abraham.*

Genesis 12:1-3 is pivotal in the book of Genesis: it moves the story forward from the preceding eleven chapters, which record God’s dealings with all nations (sometimes called “the primeval history”), into the patriarchal narratives that lead to the emergence of Israel as a distinct nation. And it is pivotal in the whole Bible because it does exactly what Paul says—it “announces the gospel in advance.” That is, it declares the good news that, in spite of all that we have read in Genesis 1—11, it is God’s ultimate purpose to bless humanity (which is very good news indeed by the time you reach Gen 11). And the story of how that blessing for all nations has come about occupies the rest of the Bible, with

⁴Gen 35:11 is similar, though it does not use the precise language of all nations being blessed. It promises rather that a “community of nations” will come from Jacob.

Christ as the central focus. Indeed the closing vision of the canon, with people of every tribe and nation and language worshiping the living God (Rev 7:9-10), clearly echoes the promise of Genesis 12:3 and binds the whole story together.

The whole Bible could be portrayed as a very long answer to a very simple question: What can God do about the sin and rebellion of the human race? Genesis 12 through to Revelation 22 is God's answer to the question posed by the bleak narratives of Genesis 3—11. Or in terms of the overall argument of this book, Genesis 3—11 sets the problem that the mission of God addresses from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22.

The story so far. Genesis 12 comes after Genesis 1—11. This innocent observation not only relates to the point just made about the pivotal nature of the opening verses of Genesis 12, it also reminds us of the importance (here as everywhere in the Bible) of paying attention to the context of any text.

The primeval narrative introduces us first to the great work of God's creation of the universe. Then it portrays men and women, made in God's image, that are entrusted with the task of caring for the earth and enjoying God's blessing in that task. The story goes awry, however, when God's human creatures choose to rebel against their Creator, distrusting his benevolence, disobeying his authority and disregarding the boundaries he had set for their freedom in his world. The result of this human seizure of moral autonomy is radical fracture in all the relationships established in creation. Human beings hide from God in guilty fear. Men and women can no longer face one another without shame and blame. The soil comes under the curse of God and the earth no longer responds to human touch as it should.

These early narratives then combine an escalating crescendo of human sin alongside repeated marks of God's grace. The serpent's head will be crushed. Adam and Eve are clothed. Cain is protected. Noah and his family are saved. Life goes on, and creation is preserved under covenant. Things are very badly flawed, but the whole project is still moving forward.

At the end of this story [of Genesis 1—11], God's world exists in a state that partially guarantees that the aim of creation will be achieved. God underwrites the rhythm of the day and the rhythm of the season. The process of filling the earth is under way. The structures of marriage, the relationships of parents and children, and the broader network of the extended family are firmly established. The patterns of agricultural life, shepherding, arts and crafts are in place. Nations have come into being.⁵

⁵John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 190.

In the aftermath of the flood God renews his promise to creation, and human beings are again sent forth under God's blessing to multiply and fill the earth (Gen 9:1). The two following chapters (Gen 10—11) need to be seen as complementary accounts of what happened next. On the one hand, chapter ten portrays the natural spreading of nations descended from the sons of Noah across the world known to the narrator. Three times this is described as "scattering" or "spreading" (Gen 9:19; 10:18, 32) in a way that suggests that such scattering of the nations was natural, unproblematic and indeed the expected outcome of the promise and command given in Genesis 9:1. How could they fill the earth unless they scattered over the face of it?

On the other hand, chapter eleven sees the matter from a very different angle.⁶ The spreading stops as people settle in the plain of Shinar (in Mesopotamia). Their decision to settle and to build a city with a tower there seems to combine arrogance (in wanting to make a name for themselves) and insecurity (in wanting not to be scattered over the whole earth as God intended). I say "seems to" because the narrator is less explicit than we might wish in informing us exactly why the builders of the city and tower so alarmed God and provoked his response. Commentators differ on the weight they put on the two main elements of the reason the builders give for their project. Calvin sees in the desire to "make a name" "nothing other than man's proud contempt for God. . . . To erect a citadel was not in itself so great a crime. But to raise an eternal monument to themselves that might endure throughout all ages showed head-strong pride as well as contempt for God."⁷ Gerhard von Rad, with more restraint, comments, "The city arises as a sign of valiant self-reliance, the tower as a sign of their will to fame."⁸ Jewish commentators, however, focus on the second phrase ("and not be scattered"): "The intention of the builders was to gather the people into a centralized location, thereby resisting God's purpose that they should multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it."⁹

Whatever nuance is intended, the reader may certainly detect, with a sinking feeling, echoes of the arrogant attempt of Adam and Eve to seize control of their

⁶It is clear from Gen 11:1 that the accounts need to be read as theologically complementary, not as chronologically sequential. It must have been as obvious to the author/editor as it is to us that the opening words of chap. 11 ("the whole world had one language") stand oddly in relation to the reference in Gen 10:31 to "clans and languages . . . territories and nations," if the accounts are read merely in sequence.

⁷John Calvin, *Genesis*, Crossway Classic Commentaries, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 103.

⁸Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 148.

⁹Bernard W. Anderson, "Unity and Diversity in God's Creation: A Study of the Babel Story," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 5 (1978): 74—quoting several Jewish scholars.

own destiny, and of the insecurity of the first person who built a city—Cain—as he wandered restlessly from the presence of God.¹⁰ There may even be a reverse echo of the story of the angelic beings that breached the line that divides heaven and earth and aroused God's anger (Gen 6:1-4). "God insists that this line be recognized. That is not to say that there is no possibility of movement between earth and heaven. It is to say that such movement lies in God's gift. . . . God will not be invaded."¹¹ The Babel story presents us with people who seem intent on reaching the heavens even while resisting God's will for them on earth.

Even before God intervenes with his act of compulsory scattering, the pathetic futility of their efforts is mocked in a few graphic touches. The city they build is inferior even by human standards (baked bricks instead of solid stone; tar for cement), and though they claim that their tower reaches to the heavens, from the perspective of heaven itself and the God who lives there, it is so miniscule that he has to come down just to see it.

God's considered response is both preventative (he stops them achieving the unified and centralized closure that they desire) and compulsory (he forces them to scatter across the earth, as originally intended, but now in a state of dividedness and confusion). God's action is not explicitly described as punitive, but it is certainly doubly ironic. It is ironic because, on the one hand, their attempt to avoid being scattered has resulted in a scattering in worse conditions than before.

Men had already been spread abroad before this [chap. 10], and that should not be thought of as a punishment, seeing that it flowed from the grace of God [chap. 9]. But now those whom the Lord had previously distributed with honor in various places, he ignominiously scattered, driving them here and there. This scattering, therefore, was not a simple dispersion in order to replenish. It was a violent rout because the principal bond between these men and God had been cut asunder.¹²

And it is ironic, on the other hand, because they had wanted to make a name for themselves and they got one, but it was not one they would have chosen. They will indeed be remembered forever, but by a name—Babel—that speaks of babbling confusion.

We can now see how chapters ten and eleven of Genesis complement each

¹⁰Claus Westermann observes the parallel with Genesis 3:5, and the further echo in the condemnation of the grasping arrogance of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:13-14. See his *Genesis 12–36*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg; London: SPCK, 1985), p. 554.

¹¹Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:190.

¹²Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 106.

other with their different perspectives on the observable reality that human beings live in great plurality and diversity.

If we picture these two stories as two panels of a diptych, then Genesis 10 emphasizes the world's unity: it has a positive ring to it as the divine command of Genesis 9:1 is fulfilled gradually. Panel 2, Genesis 11, has a negative ring: here the unity of the human race is shattered as people become unable to communicate with each other; their search for security, unity and technological mastery founders in disarray, dispersal, and divine disapproval. The human race has stumbled from *mabbul* [flood, 10:32] to *babel*. Far from Babylon being the gate of the gods, as the Babylonians conceived it, the verdict of this story is babble, jabberwocky, gabble, confusion!¹³

All the previous stories in Genesis 3—11 have had some element of God's grace. However, in this final narrative of the city and tower called Babel, no such word of grace is found. It seems that the sad story of humanity has run into the quicksand of chaotic dividedness. At one level, all the basic infrastructure of God's great creation project is still there. The heavens and the earth follow their allotted rounds and seasons. Crucial boundaries are being preserved between the day and the night, the sea and the dry land, the earth and the great deep, human and divine realms. Vegetation and animals are proliferating as intended. Human beings are multiplying in families and nations, and spreading to fill the earth.

But at another level everything is tragically adrift from the original goodness of God's purpose. The earth lies under the sentence of God's curse because of human sin. Human beings are adding to their catalog of evil as the generations roll past—jealousy, anger, murder, vengeance, violence, corruption, drunkenness, sexual disorder, arrogance. With God's permission but hardly with their Creator's best pleasure, animals are being killed for food. Women enjoy the gift of childbirth along with suffering and pain. Men find fulfillment in subduing the earth, but with sweat and frustration. Both enjoy sexual complementarity and intimacy, but along with lust and domination. Every inclination of human hearts is perduringly evil. Technology and culture are advancing, but the skill that can craft instruments for music and agriculture can also forge weapons of violent death. Nations experience the richness of their ethnic, linguistic and geographical diversity along with confusion, scattering, and strife.

The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in shrill dissonance, and we now ask the question even more urgently: Is God's relationship to the nations now finally broken; is God's gracious forbearance now exhausted; has God re-

¹³Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), pp. 95-96.

jected the nations in wrath forever? That is the burdensome question that no thoughtful reader of chapter eleven can avoid; indeed we can say that our narrator intended by means of the whole plan of his primeval history to raise precisely this question and to pose it in all its severity. Only then is the reader properly prepared to take up the strangely new thing that now follows the comfortless story about the building of the tower: the election and blessing of Abraham. We stand here, therefore, at the point where primeval history and sacred history dovetail, and thus at one of the most important places in the entire Old Testament.¹⁴

We must also immediately add, *we stand here at one of the most important places in a missiological reading of the Bible*. I have stressed that the Bible's primary concept of mission is the mission of God. But in Genesis 1—11 we see the great creative mission of God being constantly thwarted and spoiled in ways that affect not just human well-being but the whole cosmos. Where can the mission of God go from here? What can God do next?

Whatever it may be, it will have to tackle a very broad redemptive agenda. Genesis 1—11 poses a cosmic question to which God must provide a cosmic answer. The problems so graphically spread before the reader in Genesis 1—11 will not be solved just by finding a way to get human beings to heaven when they die. Death itself must be destroyed if the curse is to be removed and the way opened to the tree of life. The love and power of God must address not only the sin of individuals but also the strife and strivings of nations; not only the need of human beings but also the suffering of animals and the curse on the ground. The longing of Noah's father, Lamech, for God's comfort to relieve the earth of its curse (Gen 5:29) remains to be fulfilled.

What can God do next? Something that only God could have thought of. He sees an elderly, childless couple in the land of Babel and decides to make them the fountainhead, the launch pad of his whole mission of cosmic redemption. We can almost hear the sharp intake of breath among the heavenly hosts when the astonishing plan was revealed. They knew, as the reader of Genesis 1—11 now knows, the sheer scale of devastation that serpentine evil and human recalcitrance have wrought in God's creation. What sort of an answer can be provided through Abram and Sarai? Yet that is precisely the scale of what now follows. The call of Abram is the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of his whole creation.

Genesis 12:1-3—A Closer Look

A new world, ultimately a new creation, begins in this text. But it is a new world

¹⁴Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 152.

that bursts out of the womb of the old—the old world portrayed in Genesis 1—11. And yet that womb is barren. Not only has the story run into the sands of abandoned Babel but even the line of Shem, in whom hope seems fixed for the future, has run almost to a dead end in the barrenness of Sarah and the death of Terah in Haran (Gen 11:30, 32). History, like creation itself prior to the transforming word of God, seems shut up to futility and shrouded in darkness (Gen 1:2). But just as in Genesis 1:3, where we read “And God said,” so here we read “And YHWH said.” The word of God that spoke into darkness now speaks into barrenness with good news of astonishing reversal, holding before our imagination vistas of a future that is (almost) beyond belief. God’s mission of world redemption begins.

Translation and structure.

And YHWH said to Abram,
 Get yourself up and go¹⁵
 from your land, and from your kindred, and from your father’s house,
 to the land that I will show you.
 And I will make you into a great nation;
 and I will bless you;
 and I will make your name great.
 And be a blessing.
 And I will bless those who bless you;
 whereas the one who belittles you, I will curse;¹⁶
 and in you will be blessed all kinship groups¹⁷ on the earth.
 And Abram went just as YHWH said to him. (Gen 12:1-4, author’s translation)

¹⁵The opening verb has a reflexive pronoun after the imperative, which suggests this decisive action: *lek-lēkā*.

¹⁶The syntax of this clause gives it the flavor of dealing with an exception, rather than being part of the list of promises. It is singular (“the one who belittles, or despises, or slanders you”), whereas the previous line is plural. And the inversion of object and verb means that the verb does not follow in the list of consecutive imperatives through which God states his composite divine purpose. “The word about curse is clearly not set here as a part of the divine intention. . . . God commands Abraham to go out in order to receive blessing and bring about a stream of blessing in the world. But YHWH does not command Abraham to go out in order to bring about curse, although that may happen in the process. . . . The curse of God is not the purpose of the divine command. It is a part of the blessing of Abraham in that it promises protection” (Patrick D. Miller Jr., “Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34 [1984]: 474). Miller accordingly translates verse 3: “and that I may bless the ones blessing you—and should there be one who regards you with contempt I will curse him. So, then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you.”

¹⁷The word is *mišpāḥā*. It is sometimes translated “families,” but that is too narrow in its common English meaning. *Mišpāḥā* is a wider kinship grouping. In Israelite tribal structure it was the clan, the subgroup within the tribe. It can sometimes imply whole peoples, considered as related by kinship (as in Amos 3:1-2).

Laying out the text in this form makes clear what seems to me the best way of discerning its structure. Enveloped in between the narrative record of YHWH's address to Abram and Abram's obedience, God's actual speech falls into two halves, each launched by an imperative ("Go," and, "Be a blessing"). After each imperative follow three subordinate clauses that elucidate the implications of fulfilling the commands.

The second half is introduced by "and be a blessing." In the Masoretic Text the verb is clearly imperative, though some scholars emend it to another imperfect ("and you will be a blessing" [cf. NIV]). However, it is a feature of Hebrew (as indeed it is in English) that when two imperatives occur together the second imperative may sometimes express either the expected result or the intended purpose of carrying out the first imperative.¹⁸ Thus the flow of thought in our passage is either "Abraham, you go . . . and I will do the following . . . and *in that way* you will be a blessing (as a result)."¹⁹ Or, "Abraham, you go . . . and I will do the following . . . *so that* you may be a blessing, (which is my intention)." Either way, the message of the combined halves of the text clearly is that if Abraham does what he is told, and if God does what he says he will do, the result will be blessing all round. Good news indeed, as Paul remarked.

Verse 4 begins equally positively with *Abraham* in fact doing exactly what YHWH told him, so we read on with anticipation to see how *God* will keep his word also, and (though we will have to keep reading for a long time) how that mysterious concluding word of universal blessing will be accomplished. The mission is launched. Abraham obeys God's command; God's promise is thereby released into the history of the nations.

Leaving and blessing. Another interesting feature of Genesis 12:1-3 is the balancing way the three narrowing dimensions of Abraham's leaving (the first imperative) are set against the three broadening expressions of how and for whom he is to be a blessing (the second imperative). On the one hand, he is to leave his land (the widest sphere of his identity), his wider kindred and then his immediate extended family. On the other hand, he is to be a blessing. The object of this blessing is at first unspecified (except that it will include the fact that he himself individually will be blessed), then it progresses to those who bless him, and finally issues in blessing for all the kinship groups on earth.

¹⁸For example, in double commands like: "Go outside and get some fresh air" or "Come home with us and stay the night." The second imperative can only be realized if and when the first is fulfilled. The second is the purpose or result of the first. The first is a condition of enjoying the second. This is the relationship of the two imperatives in God's word to Abraham.

¹⁹Reverting for convenience here to the emended name (Abraham) of Gen 17:5 by which he is more commonly known.

Pursuing the same point by setting the opening and closing lines of God's address to Abraham alongside one another, we read (reverting to the NIV):

Leave *your* country, *your* people and *your* father's household . . .
and *all peoples on earth* / will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:1, 3)

Only Abraham's leaving releases the nations' blessing. In spite of all that we have witnessed of the fallen world in the primeval history, there can yet be blessing for that world. But it will not come from within that world itself. Abraham must relinquish all that ties him to the land of Babylon before he can be the vehicle of blessing to the whole earth. Babel, the climax of the problem portrayed in Genesis 1—11, cannot be the source of the solution. In this way even the great Mesopotamian empires are relativized and negated. The greatest human achievements cannot solve the deepest human problems. God's mission of blessing the nations is a radical new start. It requires a break, a radical departure from the story so far, not merely an evolutionary development from it.

When Abraham first appears in Genesis 12, it is in the context of a society already marked by the story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11. Indeed, it is the land of Babel out of which Abraham was called. As the story indicates, it was a culture of immense self-confidence and pride. At the very least Abraham's God-required departure relativized it. Human salvation was not to be found in the state per se. The ultimate redemptive purpose of God lay elsewhere, invested in the tenuous human vessel of the ageing husband of a barren wife. The calling of Abraham out of his country and his people (Gen 12:1) was "the first Exodus by which the imperial civilizations of the Near East in general receive their stigma as environments of lesser meaning."²⁰

Countering Babel. The comparison and contrast with Babel can be seen in two other textual hints. First, the builders of the city and tower wanted to "make a name" for themselves—that is, achieve their own renown and establish a permanent memorial to their cleverness or a citadel for their power. God put a stop to that ambition. To Abraham, however, God says, "I will make *your* name great" (v. 2). The echo is undoubtedly deliberate. What human beings try to achieve in their centralizing arrogance is doomed ultimately to frustration and failure.

Pride of man and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust.

²⁰Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 222. The quote at the end is from E. Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1956), p. 140.

What with care and toil he buildeth
Tower and temple fall to dust.²¹

True renown comes only from God's gift and in relation to God's blessing on those who trust and obey him, as Abraham did.

Second, the narrative of Babel five times uses the expression "the whole earth" (Gen 11:1, 4, 8, 9 [x2]). It is a tale with a truly global perspective. And it ends in global confusion and scattering. God's word to Abraham, by contrast, ends with the promise of global blessing for all nations on earth.²² God's mission is "to make His blessings flow / far as the curse is found."²³

Clearly, then, we are meant to see this new initiative as God's response to the world portrayed in the preceding chapters, especially the dual perspective on the world of nations that we found in the table of nations in Genesis 10 and the Babel episode in Genesis 11. The mission of God will be to preserve and maximize the blessing that is inherent in the multiplication and spread of the nations while removing the blight of human sin and arrogance represented by Babel. And Abraham will be the trigger for that process, a process that will ultimately include all nations in the scope of its blessing.

Whereas the other stories of Genesis 3—11 have their elements of divine saving grace, only the story of Babel has none. But in fact this new thing bursting on the scene in Genesis 12 is exactly that—though it significantly does not come *within* the story of Babel. It has to come from outside.

The merciful grace of YHWH, which persists through all the narratives of the prologue save the last, now overcomes the final treason of the nations in their zealous efforts to build civilization without God, their insatiate lust for renown and power, and the final scattering over all the face of the earth. Abram becomes the embodiment of divine grace, and it is a grace qualitatively other than the deeds of grace in the primeval history. At Babel's tower and the nations' scattering, the gates to the future seemed closed once for all, but now YHWH opens them again and in a unique way, by summoning them [the nations] to him through the selection of the man Abram and the people Israel.²⁴

²¹Joachim Neander (1650-1680), "All My Hope on God Is Founded," adapted by Robert S. Bridges in 1899.

²²The phrase is slightly different, though the universal reference is clear. In Genesis 11 it is *kōl hā'āreṣ*. In Genesis 12:3 it is *kōl mišpēhōt hā 'ādāmā*. However, *'ereṣ* and *'ādāmā* are often used interchangeably, with the latter referring more particularly to the surface (soil) of the earth—the place of human habitation. Later versions of the promise to Abraham use *'ereṣ* also. Genesis 18:18, e.g., speaks of *kōl gōyē hā'āreṣ* (all nations of the earth).

²³Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World" (1719).

²⁴James Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations: Blessing and World History," *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 393.

The promise develops. Genesis 12:1-3 is the first in a series of promissory statements that God makes to Abraham and then reaffirms to Isaac and Jacob after the deaths of their respective fathers. We need to look at these additional texts to feel the full force of the Abrahamic covenant.

In Genesis 15 (where the language of covenant is first used [v. 18]), the focus is on the gift of the land to Abraham's descendants (which had first been promised when Abraham arrived in it [Gen 12:7]). But this is preceded by a renewal of the promise of an heir, not just an adopted one as Abraham suggested (Gen 15:2-3) but a son of Abraham himself. From this son and heir would come a progeny as numerous as the stars—"a great nation" (Gen 12:2) indeed. It is to this promise that Abraham responds with that counterintuitive faith which YHWH credits as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

In Genesis 17 the focal point is the requirement of circumcision. Appropriately, in view of the moral commitment that circumcision was later understood to entail, the chapter begins with God telling Abraham, "Walk about in front of my face and be whole" (Gen 17:1, author's translation). This is followed by a summary repetition of God's earlier promises: "and I will establish my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply your numbers very greatly indeed" (Gen 17:2). The dynamic of the syntax is the same as in Genesis 12:1-3—a double command followed by statements of divine intention. The opening verb is the same, *hālak*—walk. But in Genesis 12:1 it is in the form of an abrupt command to set out on a journey from one place to another, whereas in Genesis 17:1 it is in the more general form, "walk about," that is, live your daily life. The inner logic is also similar: the two commands are related as purpose or result. It will be as Abraham lives his life in open transparency before God that he will be characterized by wholeness and integrity. Obedience to the first command enables the fulfillment of the second. Meanwhile, surrounding both commands are the covenant affirmations and intentions of God.²⁵

In Genesis 17 the covenant with Abraham is called "an eternal covenant." And here also the language more familiar in the Sinai covenant is found, as God promises to be the God of Abraham's descendants (Gen 17:7-8). But the universal perspective of blessing for other nations is not lost. Rather it is amplified by the change of Abram's name to Abraham, with the repeated explanation that he

²⁵The ethical focus sharpens even further in Gen 18. In Gen 18:19 God affirms in a pregnant and programmatic soliloquy that his whole intention in choosing Abraham was "so that he would teach his household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice" (author's translation). We will return for more extended reflection on the ethical dimensions of God's missional agenda through Abraham in chap. 11, "The Life of God's Missional People."

will be “the father of many nations” (Gen 17:4-5). Sarai, renamed Sarah, likewise is to be “the mother of nations,” and kings will come from both of them (Gen 17:6, 16)—making it clear that the promise will be fulfilled through a child of Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael, as the child of Abraham and Hagar, will also be blessed in the same terms as Abraham himself, except that the everlasting covenant through which blessing will come to all nations is to be channeled through (the promised but as yet unborn) Isaac.

Genesis 22, “the aesthetic and theological summit of the whole story of Abraham,”²⁶ portrays the ultimate test of Abraham’s trust and obedience in his willingness to sacrifice the child of promise at God’s command to God himself. We will return in more depth to this chapter when we look at “Ethics and Mission” in chapter eleven. What matters for our purpose here is the way the episode ends with a climactic and intensified confirmation of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, specifically endorsed on the basis of Abraham’s obedience.

And he said,
 By myself I have sworn, oracle of YHWH,
 it is *because of the fact that you have done this thing*
 and have not kept back your son, your only one,
 that I will most surely bless you,
 and I will most surely multiply your offspring [seed],
 like the stars in the heavens and like the sand on the seashore,
 and your offspring will possess the gate of your enemies.
 And in your offspring all the nations of the world will find blessing,
on account of the fact that you obeyed me. (Gen 22:16-18, author’s translation, emphasis added)

Covenantal obedience and mission. Not only is Genesis 22:16-18 the strongest of all the accounts of God’s promise to Abraham, confirmed with the highest possible form of oath (God swearing by God’s own self), it also makes quite explicit the relationship between God’s promised intentions on the one hand and Abraham’s faith and obedience on the other. This had been quietly implicit from the moment the initial command was issued in Genesis 12:1, but it has become increasingly clear through the call to walk before God and be blameless in Genesis 17 and the requirement of righteousness and justice in Genesis 18.

In the light of the subtle but clear theology of these texts, the old dispute over whether the covenant with Abraham was conditional or unconditional

²⁶Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16—50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word, 1994), p. 99.

seems far too simplistic in its neat binary alternatives. The reality incorporates both dimensions.

On the one hand, God's initial choice, address, command and promise to Abraham were all *unconditional* in the sense that they did not depend on any *prior* condition that Abraham had fulfilled. They emerge out of the unexpected and unmerited grace of God and out of God's undaunted determination to bless this human race of divided nations in spite of all that has thwarted his good will so far.

And yet on the other hand there is an *implied conditionality* in the very form of the foundational address in Genesis 12:1-3. Everything hinges on the opening command "Get yourself up and go from [here] to the land I will show you." The subsequent statements about God blessing Abraham, magnifying his name and multiplying his progeny are all predicated on Abraham actually getting up and going forth. Likewise, the second command "And be a blessing," with its anticipated universal scope, is dependent on Abraham's obedience to the first command, combined with God keeping his word. Though the form of the speech is a double command with attendant promises, the implied thrust of it is "*If* you will go (as I command), *then* I will do these things (as I promise) . . . and all nations will be blessed." No leaving, no blessing. Bluntly put, if Abraham had not got up and left for Canaan, the story would have ended right there, or with an endless recycling of the fate of Babel. The Bible would be a very thin book indeed.

Nevertheless, it is certainly true that the emphasis in the first address of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is on God's own gracious initiative and astonishing unprompted promises. However, by Genesis 22 the faith and obedience of Abraham, which have been developing (not without setbacks) in the intervening chapters, are fully incorporated into the covenant to such an extent that they can even be cited as a validating justification for it. God's speech in Genesis 22:16-18 emphatically begins and ends by making Abraham's obedience the reason for God now binding himself irrevocably on oath to do what he has promised.

It should hardly need to be said that this does not in any way mean that Abraham has *merited* God's covenant promises. We are not slipping into some caricature of works righteousness by making these observations on the biblical text itself. God had addressed Abraham out of the blue and prior to any action on Abraham's part. But Abraham's response of faith and obedience not only moves God to count him as righteous but also enables God's promise to move forward toward its universal horizon.

Abraham by his obedience has not qualified to be the recipient of blessing, because the promise of blessing had been given to him already. Rather, the existing

promise is reaffirmed but its terms of reference are altered. A promise that previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of YHWH is transformed so that it is now grounded *both* in the will of YHWH *and* in the obedience of Abraham. It is not that the divine promise has become contingent on Abraham's obedience, but that Abraham's obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise. Henceforth Israel owes its existence not just to YHWH but also to Abraham. Theologically this constitutes a profound understanding of the value of human obedience—it can be taken up by God and become a motivating factor in his purposes towards humanity.²⁷

Paul and James between them capture both poles of Abraham's response to God. Paul focuses on the faith that led Abraham to *believe in the promises of God*, however impossible they seemed, and that was thereby counted as righteousness. Paul can draw from that the message that righteousness comes by trusting God's gracious promise, not through any work of the law, such as circumcision, which comes later in the narrative (Rom 4; Gal 3:6-29). James focuses on the faith that led Abraham to *obey the command of God*, thus demonstrating in practice the genuineness of his faith (Jas 2:20-24).²⁸ Hebrews captures both by headlining Abraham's faith while substantiating it through his obedience, from his initial departure from his homeland to the classic account of his obedience in Genesis 22 (Heb 11:8-19).

For ourselves, with our concern for a missiological reading of these texts, the important point to notice is the way God's intention to bless the nations is combined with human commitment to a quality of obedience that enables us to be the agent of that blessing. The glorious gospel of the Abrahamic covenant is that God's mission is ultimately to bless all the nations. The enduring challenge is that he planned to do that "through you and your descendants." The faith and obedience of Abraham therefore are not merely models for personal piety and ethics. They are also the essential credentials for effective participation in the limitless mission encapsulated in the two Hebrew words translated as "Be a blessing." There is no blessing for ourselves or for others without faith and obedience. Those whom God calls to participate in his redemptive mission for the

²⁷R.W. L. Moberly, "Christ as the Key to Scripture: Genesis 22 Reconsidered," in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, ed. R. S. Hess et al. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 161.

²⁸John Goldingay points out that the Hebrew text does not particularly distinguish between "promise" and "command" in its record of God's address to Abraham. Often it simply has "and God said." So faith and obedience are actually complementary responses to the word of God. Neither can truly exist without the other. You cannot obey God's word unless you believe it. But you cannot truly claim to believe God's word unless you obey it. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:198.

nations are those who exercise saving faith like Abraham *and* demonstrate costly obedience like Abraham. So, *the things God said to Abraham* become the ultimate agenda for God's own mission (blessing the nations), and *the things Abraham did in response* become the proximate model for our mission (faith and obedience).

“Go . . . and be a blessing”

There can be no mistaking what the central theme of Genesis 12:1-3 is. The words *bless* and *blessing* gleam like jewels in an ornamental goblet. The Hebrew root, *brk*, as verb or noun, occurs five times in these three verses. God declares that he will *bless* Abraham, that Abraham is to be a *blessing*, that God will *bless* those who *bless* Abraham and that all families on earth will count themselves *blessed* through him.²⁹ In the wake of the stories that have battered the reader for the past nine chapters of Genesis, this is a most surprising and exhilarating chorus. The God whose blessing first bathed creation is on the move to bless yet again with repetitive intensity and startling extent. But what exactly, we are bound to ask, do the words mean? What might an attentive reader of Scripture understand by *blessing* here?

To answer that question we must properly begin in the immediate environment of our text—the book of Genesis. But the word obviously gathers a wide range of rich content in the faith and literature of Israel. So for the sake of our missiological hermeneutic we need to scan this inventory of blessing, however briefly. Furthermore we have seen that the last line of our text, “through you all nations on earth will be blessed,” generated a canonical trajectory of expectation that ultimately comes to earth in the missional theology and eschatology of Paul in the New Testament.

Blessing is creational and relational. The first creatures to be blessed by God were fish and birds. In the majestic account of creation in Genesis 1, God's blessing is pronounced three times: on day five, he blessed the creatures of the sea and air; on day six, he blessed human beings; and on day seven he blessed the sabbath. The first two blessings are immediately followed by the instruction to multiply and fill the seas and the earth. The third is followed by the words of sanctification and rest that define the sabbath. Blessing then, in this foundational creation account, is constituted by fruitfulness, abundance and fullness on the one hand, and by enjoying rest within creation in holy and harmonious relationship with the Creator on the other. Blessing is off to a good start.

²⁹We will examine the disputed meaning of the final verb on pp. 217-19.

The next time we hear of God's blessing, it is launching the new world after the flood, and the language is almost the same as in the first creation account (Gen 9). God blesses Noah and his family, and instructs them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. At the same time he enters into a relationship with them that includes respect for life—whether animal or human blood—and the preservation of life. That blessing and command are then worked out in the spreading of the nations in Genesis 10.

So when we come to Genesis 12:1-3, the word of blessing must include at least the concept of multiplication, spreading, filling and abundance. But Abraham's wife, we are told, is barren and both of them are elderly. So the word in such a context is surprising to say the least. It is clear to any reader of Genesis so far what blessing *ought* to mean, but the means by which blessing might be enjoyed by this old couple is decidedly unclear. The fruitfulness of creation has surely passed them by. The window of blessing that had never opened because of Sarah's barrenness is now finally shuttered by her advancing years.

As we read on in Genesis, the creational content of blessing predominates. In fact, the root *brk*, as verb or noun, occurs eighty-eight times in Genesis, which is just over a fifth of all its occurrences in the whole Old Testament. When God blesses someone, it normally includes increase of family, flocks, wealth or all three. God's blessing means enjoying the good gifts of God's creation in abundance.

God's blessing is manifested most obviously in human prosperity and well-being; long life, wealth, peace, good harvests and children are the items that figure most frequently in lists of blessings such as Genesis 24:35-36, Leviticus 26:4-13, and Deuteronomy 28:3-15. What modern secular man calls "luck" or "success" the Old Testament calls "blessing," for it insists that God alone is the source of all good fortune. Indeed, the presence of God walking among his people is the highest of his blessings (Lev 26:11-12). Material blessings are in themselves tangible expressions of divine benevolence. Blessing not only connects the patriarchal narratives with each other (cf. Gen 24:1; 26:3; 35:9; 39:5), it also links them with the primeval history (cf. Gen 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). The promises of blessing to the patriarchs are thus a reassertion of God's original intentions for humans.³⁰

However, there is nothing mechanical about this. The *relational* element is seen both vertically and horizontally.

Vertically, those who are blessed know who it is that is blessing them and seek to live in faithful relationship with their God. We do not know as much as

³⁰Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1—15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987), p. 275.

we might like about the personal religious faith and practice of the ancestral families of Israel (and some of what we do know is puzzling). But it clearly did include sincere worship, building of altars, prayer, trust and (in the case of Abraham at least) a deepening personal intimacy with God.

Even outsiders like Abimelech knew that it was YHWH who was blessing their strange neighbors (Gen 26:29). Indeed, the patriarchs normally do not hesitate to witness concerning the God who has blessed them.

Theirs is not a mute faith. The patriarchs verbalize to others the reality of Yahweh that they have experienced in their lives: they tell of his provision of wealth (30:30; 31:5-13; 33:10-11; cf. 24:35), his protection and guidance (31:42; 50:20; cf. 24:40-49, 56); his giving of children (33:5); . . . and their commitment to his moral standards (39:9).³¹

That relationship with God is never easy. For Abraham the final sworn confirmation of blessing comes only after the most severe testing imaginable (Gen 22). And the mysterious account of Jacob wrestling with God ends with him eliciting a blessing through a bruising face-to-face encounter (Gen 32:26-29). When blind and aged Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, he acknowledges that the blessing he now passes on is one that has attended his own life like a shepherd protecting a wandering and vulnerable sheep, and one that had marked the life of his father and grandfather as they walked before God.

May the God before whom my fathers
Abraham and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd
all my life to this day,
the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—
may he bless these boys. (Gen 48:15-16)

Horizontally, the relational element of blessing reaches out to those around. Genesis has several instances of people being blessed through contact with those whom God has blessed. Unselfconsciously (usually—Jacob is perhaps an exception), those who inherit the Abrahamic family blessing fulfill the intention that they should be a blessing to others. Laban is enriched by God's blessing on Jacob (Gen 30:27-30). Potiphar is blessed through the presence of Joseph (Gen 39:5). Pharaoh is blessed by Jacob (Gen 47:7, 10). The one remarkable reversal of this (to which Hebrews gives considerable theological significance) is the moment when Abraham himself is blessed by Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20; cf. Heb 7).

³¹M. Daniel Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10 (2000): 29.

The most beautiful combination of the creational and relational dimensions of blessing is found in Jacob's blessing on Joseph. It holds together three dimensions: first, the source of all blessing—God; second, the personal and possessive relationship within which that blessing is enjoyed (he is “your father's God,” “the Rock of Israel,” etc); and third, the creational abundance that the blessing envisions.

Because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob,
because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
because of your father's God, who helps you,
because of the Almighty, who blesses you
with blessings of the heavens above,
blessings of the deep that lies below,
blessings of the breast and the womb.
Your father's blessings are greater
than the blessings of the ancient mountains,
than the bounty of the age-old hills.
Let all these rest on the head of Joseph. (Gen 49:24-26)

Blessing is missional and historical. “Go . . . and be a blessing.” The words that launch both halves of God's address to Abraham are both imperatives. Both therefore have the nature of a charge or a mission laid on Abraham. The first mission was geographical and limited. He was to leave home and go to the land God would show him. That mission is completed in a relatively short time in the next three verses—though of course the mission of taking possession of the land as promised in Genesis 12:7 would take many more generations. But the second mission is unbounded—“be a blessing.” And its scope is unlimited in time and geography. Abraham must leave his own land so that blessing will come to peoples of all lands. *Blessing* here as a command, as a task, as a role is something that goes beyond the sense of creational abundance that we have seen so far in Genesis. “Be a blessing” thus entails a purpose and goal that stretches into the future. It is, in short, missional.

In fact, this is the opening command of the mission of God to restore what humanity seemed intent on wrecking, and to save humanity itself from the consequences of their own wicked folly. It is the third great missional command from God to human beings. The first two are *creational* and virtually identical. In Genesis 1—2 God charges human beings with the great task of ruling over the rest of the creation through keeping and serving the earth in which he has placed them (Gen 1:28; 2:15). And in Genesis 9, after the flood, God renewed his original creation mandate to Noah and his sons. Blessed by God, and living

in a stable environment guaranteed by God's covenant with all life on earth, they were to go forth, be fruitful and fill the earth.

Here in Genesis 12:2, however, we have the launch of God's *redemptive* mission. The word *blessing* links it with the creation narratives that precede it. The work of redemptive and restorative blessing will take place within and for the created order, not in some other heavenly or mythological realm beyond it or to which we can escape. It is creation that is broken by human sin, so it is creation and humanity together that God intends to mend. "Mission is the address of God's blessing to the deficit brought about by human failure and pride."³²

And since it was by human hands that sin and evil have invaded life on earth, it would be by human means that God would act to redress it. The declaration of *blessing* on Abraham and the anticipation of the *inclusion* of all kindreds and nations in the blessing of Abraham answer the language of *curse* and *exclusion* in Genesis 3. "Mission is God's address to humanity's forfeit."³³ God had promised that it would be the seed of Eve (i.e., a human being) that would crush the head of the serpent and thereby destroy his deleterious handiwork (Gen 3:15). Attentive readers will have been wondering who this serpent crusher will be. From Genesis 12:1-3 onward we know it will be one of the seed of Abraham. A son of Abraham will be a blessing for the sons of Adam. "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19).

Paul was of course thinking of Christ in the whole argument in which this statement comes. But it could have been said with relative theological validity about Abraham, for we have seen that the obedience of Abraham is a key element in the confirmation of God's covenant with him for the blessing of all nations (Gen 22:16-18). And indeed it *was* said about Abraham in Jewish tradition long before Paul. Abraham, it was said, was God's "second Adam"—the one through whom God made a fresh start for humanity in such a way that Israel could be seen as the core of a new, redeemed, human race.³⁴ Building on this understanding of the relationship between Abraham and Adam, Paul affirms that *Jesus*, the seed of Abraham, is the one through whom that promise has become a reality.

With the same dynamic understanding of the place of Jesus within the nar-

³²Christopher Seitz, "Election and Blessing: Mission and the Old Testament," lecture given at the Divinity School, Cambridge University in October 2000.

³³Ibid.

³⁴"Israel's covenantal vocation caused her to think of herself as the creator's true humanity. If Abraham and his family are understood as the creator's means of dealing with the sin of Adam, and hence with the evil in the world, Israel herself becomes the true Adamic humanity." N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 262. Wright substantiates this widely from rabbinic sources and Old Testament texts.

rative of “the gospel announced in advance to Abraham,” Matthew begins his gospel affirming Jesus the Messiah as the son of Abraham and ends it with the mission mandate that would encompass all nations. He thus sets the church also under the authority of the Abrahamic mission. The words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, the so-called Great Commission, could be seen as a christological mutation of the original Abrahamic commission—“Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all nations on earth will be blessed through you.”

And since the mission to “be a blessing” is given to a human being and his seed after him, it necessarily takes on a *historical* dimension. Blessing in and of itself need not be a historical thing. Hitherto in Genesis it has been simply a relatively static, inbuilt feature of the created order, the enjoyment of fruitfulness and abundance. However, by making blessing a *promise* for the future (“I will bless you”) and by including blessing in a *command* to be carried on into the future (“Be a blessing”), our text transforms it into a historical dynamic.³⁵ Genesis 12:1-3 injects blessing into history. It launches a mission that holds hope for the future.

The unfolding biblical story of all the generations yet to come will doubtless give plenty more evidence of *human fallenness*. All the marks of the prototypical narratives of the primeval history will replay themselves again and again. We have not seen the last of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the jealousy and violence of Cain, the vengeance of Lamech, the corruption and violence of the generation of Noah or the arrogant insecurity of Babel. But what we now know we must look for as well are the footprints of *divine blessing* on the road of history—blessing received from God and blessing passed on to others. We will look for the “great nation” that God here promises. We will discern the dividing line that people will create by their reaction to what God will do through this blessed people. And we will look for the growing evidence that the blessing of God through the people of Abraham will eventually spread throughout the whole earth. *We will, in short, be watching the mission of God in the midst of human history, the key that unlocks the Bible's grand narrative, and it all starts here.*

Genesis 12:1-3, then, launches redemptive history within the continuum of

³⁵This point is emphasized by Claus Westermann: “Blessing is not of its nature a historical thing. It can be given to anyone, as in Gen. 27. However, it need not, as originally understood, have in view some future point in time; that is, it need not be a promise. In 12:1-3 J links blessing and history, and thereby links the story of the patriarchs with the history of the people. . . . The effect of the blessing is that Abraham becomes a great people. This sentence expresses in the clearest possible way that J is looking beyond the history of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into the future.” Westermann, *Genesis 12—26*, p. 149.

wider human history—all of which is also, of course, under the sovereign plan of God. And it launches that history as the history of mission—the mission that God takes on himself in his categorical commitments to Abraham and his offspring, and the mission that God lays on Abraham in consequence—“Be a blessing.” It would be entirely appropriate, and no bad thing, if we took *this* text as “the Great Commission.” Certainly it is the biblical foundation on which the text in Matthew is based that is usually elevated to that role. We may know a great deal more than Abraham did of “the whole counsel of God,” of the mystery hidden for ages but now revealed in the Messiah Jesus through the gospel. But even with all that greater knowledge and fuller revelation, it would not be an inappropriate slogan with which to grace all the church’s concept and practice of mission. There could be worse ways of summing up what mission is supposed to be all about than “Go . . . and be a blessing.”

Blessing is covenantal and ethical. The blessings of creation continue and are showered on all. Genesis shows God blessing many others besides Abraham and his descendants. The growth and diversity of nations reflect his purpose after the flood. So God’s blessing is not confined to the sphere of the covenant or redemptive history. The covenant includes God’s blessing, but God’s blessing is not limited to the covenant. Even those who are not included within that specific sphere may enjoy the blessing of numerical growth along with all the nations. Thus, although much ink is spilled telling the story of how Esau was irreversibly cheated of his father’s blessing by Jacob (Gen 27), it did not stop Esau going on to become a numerous nation, the Edomites, or producing kings among his offspring before Israel had any (Gen 36, cf. v. 31). Clearly the blessing that he lost and Jacob obtained included more than nationhood alone.

The distinction between the general blessing of God and the specifically covenantal blessing that is enjoyed by the descendants of Abraham and Sarah through the line of promise is most clearly seen in the case of Ishmael. It is noteworthy that both God and Abraham speak warmly of Ishmael (only Sarah responds negatively to his perceived threat to her Isaac [Gen 21:8-10]). In response to Abraham’s plea “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing,” God responds that indeed he will: “I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. . . . And I will make him into a great nation” (Gen 17:18-20)—words that unmistakably echo the promise made to Abraham himself. Later this promise regarding Ishmael is repeated, and even after his expulsion from Abraham’s household it is recorded that “God was with the boy as he grew up” (Gen 21:13, 20). Nevertheless, it is with *Isaac* (named but as yet unborn in chap. 17), that God intends to make his *covenant* (Gen 17:19, 21). This indicates something unique about the nature of the blessing

that will reside within the covenant relationship. It does not deny that God can and will bless others outside the Abrahamic covenant in all kinds of ways, but it does point to a form of blessing that goes beyond creational abundance and natural fertility.³⁶

As the Old Testament story proceeds, the nature of the blessing that Israel enjoys within the covenant becomes increasingly specific. It includes the experience of God's faithfulness, on account of Abraham, and God's rescue of them from slavery in Egypt in the exodus. It goes on to encompass his protective care of them in the wilderness, providing for their needs and forgiving their offenses. The revelation of God's name, the giving of the law at Sinai and the means of continued fellowship through the tabernacle and sacrificial system are all marks of God's covenantal blessing. The gift of land is in direct fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and is seen as the most tangible of all the blessings that flowed from it.

In all these things, Israel is called on to respond in the same way as the paradigm Abraham has set—in faith and obedience. Blessing within the covenant thus includes knowledge of who the only true and living God is (through the revelation of his name, YHWH), and commitment to love and obey him in such a way that the blessing may continue to be enjoyed (Deut 4:32-40). The whole book of Deuteronomy climaxes in the powerful appeal to Israel to “choose life,” that is, to sustain the blessing in which they stood through the covenant promises of God by living in loving, trusting and obedient relationship with their God (Deut 30).

This ethical dimension of blessing within the covenant relationship protects the creational element from degenerating into any kind of “prosperity gospel.” While it is certainly true to say that material abundance can be a tangible sign of God's blessing, the link between the two is neither automatic nor reversible.

³⁶On this point, therefore, I differ from John Goldingay, who draws from this passage that Ishmael, through the blessings promised to him and through receiving circumcision (the sign of the covenant in Gen 17), is included within the Abrahamic covenant along with all his descendants (Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:201, 203). It seems to me that the text distinguishes between Isaac, who explicitly inherits the covenant promise, and Ishmael, who, though circumcised and blessed, does not. However, as Goldingay well shows (pp. 224-31), there are areas of ambiguity in these stories as to “who counts” as belonging within the sphere of covenant blessing. What about Moab and Ammon, descendants of Lot, or Edom, descendants of Esau? The later Old Testament has similar ambiguity as to their status. In any case, one might point out, even if the line of covenant blessing moves exclusively from Abraham through Isaac to Jacob and the people of Israel, we have been told from the start that the whole point of it is so that others will be blessed, or bless themselves, through Abraham. So while Ishmael may not be included in the covenantal family line, his descendants will certainly be among the “all nations” that will be blessed through Abraham.

That is to say, God calls for faith, obedience and ethical loyalty to the demands of the covenant in bad as well as good times. Not all material loss or physical suffering is the result of disobedience (as the books of Job and Jeremiah illustrate). And not all wealth is obtained under God's blessing (as Amos and other prophets made clear). The realities of injustice and oppression, which reduce some people to poverty and make other people very rich, undercut any simplistic correlation between wealth (or lack of) and God's blessing (or absence of). We will look further at the ethical dimension of the covenant as it relates to mission in chapter eleven.

Blessing is multinational and christological. The bottom line of God's address to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is universal. The outcome of God's blessing of Abraham and commanding Abraham himself to be a blessing would be blessing for "all the kinship groups of the earth." This universal scope of the Abrahamic promise is the clinching argument for recognizing the missiological centrality of this text—which is already quite explicit anyway in the command "Be a blessing." It is time to look at the final phrase more closely. For although its universal reach is clear, precise exegesis of its meaning is less so.

Variants of the phrase occur in the following five texts.³⁷

1. "In you will be blessed all kinship groups of the earth [*mišpəḥōt hā'ādāmā*]" (Gen 12:3). This is the original promise to Abraham.
2. "In him will be blessed all nations of the earth [*gōyē hā'āreš*]" (Gen 18:18). God reminds himself of the future significance of Abraham.
3. "In your seed all nations of the earth [*gōyē hā'āreš*] will bless themselves" (Gen 22:18). In the wake of Abraham's obedient willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the promise is repeated to Abraham with strong emphasis.
4. "In your seed all nations of the earth [*gōyē hā'āreš*] will bless themselves" (Gen 26:4). Here the promise is reaffirmed to Isaac in identical words, but again with an immediately following emphasis on Abraham's moral obedience.
5. "In you will be blessed all kinship groups of the earth [*mišpəḥōt hā'ādāmā*], and in your seed" (Gen 28:14). This time God is reaffirming the promise to Jacob at Bethel.

The key verb is of course, *bārak*, "to bless." It occurs in two verbal forms in these verses, and there has been much dispute over the precise nuance of translation. In the first, second and fifth texts, it is in the niphal form, and in third

³⁷ All are my own translations.

and fourth, it is in hithpael. The niph'al form of the Hebrew verb can be passive or reflexive or "middle," but the hithpael is more naturally reflexive. The three possible ways of reading the words, then, are passive, reflexive or middle, which I will explain.

A *passive* rendering is simply "will be blessed," with the assumption "by God" or "by me." Most ancient versions rendered it this way, and so does the New Testament (e.g., by Paul in Gal 3:8). There were simpler forms of the Hebrew verb that would express the passive, however (the pual), and the niph'al has a flavor just beyond a merely passive sense.

A *reflexive* rendering "will bless themselves" means that people would use the name of Abraham in blessing one another. That is, either praying for themselves to be blessed as Abraham was or invoking the name of Abraham in praying a blessing for others ("may God bless you like Abraham"). This would fit with the known practice of invoking the names of particularly blessed individuals in praying for oneself or others (e.g., Gen 48:20; Ruth 4:11-12). It also better fits the sense in Psalm 72:17.

A *middle* sense (at least for the three niph'al texts) is argued for by Gordon Wenham, who translates, "they will find blessing." Another way of expressing this sense is "they will count themselves blessed."³⁸

Since it would seem natural to assume that the variations in the five texts are so minor that the main verbs should all be taken in the same way,³⁹ the debate has been whether all should be taken as passive (*be blessed*, closer to the natural niph'al)⁴⁰ or as reflexive (*bless themselves*, closer to the natural hithpael).⁴¹

However, it is increasingly being realized that in the end a reflexive sense carries a passive inference anyway. This is because of the rest of the things God promises. If someone uses the name of Abraham as a blessing—that is to say, they pray to be blessed as Abraham was—it presupposes that they know about the God who blessed Abraham so much that he became a showcase of the power of that God to bless. Such people thereby acknowledge both Abraham and Abraham's God. But God has just said he will bless those who "bless Abraham"—that is, those who regard Abraham as blessed in this way. So those who

³⁸Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, pp. 277-78.

³⁹Though Carroll R. suggests there may be specific reasons why the hithpael is used in the two cases where it occurs. Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations," pp. 23-24.

⁴⁰As in early translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, the NIV and cf. O. T. Allis, "The Blessing of Abraham," *Princeton Theological Review* 25 (1927): 263-98.

⁴¹As in many critical scholars and cf. RSV and NEB. A recent defender of the passive reading, however, is Keith N. Grueneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nation: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

bless themselves by Abraham (if we give the *hithpael* its full force) will end up being blessed by God because he promises to do so. The reflexive implies the passive as an outcome. Claus Westermann comes to this conclusion.

In fact, the reflexive translation is saying no less than the passive. . . . When “the families of the earth bless” themselves “in Abraham,” i.e., call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name . . . then the obvious presupposition is that they receive the blessing. Where one blesses oneself with the name of Abraham, blessing is actually bestowed and received. Where the name of Abraham is spoken in a prayer for blessing, the blessing of Abraham streams forth; it knows no bound and reaches all the families of the earth. There is then no opposition in content between the passive and reflexive translation. . . . [Verse 3] includes the concrete fact of being blessed. . . . God’s action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his posterity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth.⁴²

A further missiological consideration strengthens this point. As mentioned above, if a simple passive had been intended, Hebrew has such a form (the *pual*, as in 2 Sam 7:29 and Ps 112:2, or the *qal* passive participle, as in Is 19:24). But *niphal* and *hithpael* forms have been deliberately used, which, while they do include a passive sense, have the reflexive, self-involving nuance as well. Why should this matter? I think it does for the following reason. The act of blessing oneself, or counting oneself blessed, by (the name of) Abraham indicates that one knows the source of the blessing. To know Abraham as a model of blessing and to seek to be blessed as he was must surely include knowing the God of Abraham and seeking blessing from that God and not other gods.

Now actually, a person may “be blessed” (in the passive sense) without necessarily knowing or acknowledging the source of the blessing. Tragically, many (including within Old Testament Israel) attribute the blessings they have in fact received from the living Creator God to other gods. Such experience of general blessing simply by living in God’s blessed creation (along with what is often called “common grace”) is not in itself redemptive, for it does not include “knowing God.”⁴³ But a person cannot intentionally and specifically invoke *blessing in the name of Abraham* without acknowledging the source of Abraham’s blessing, namely, Abraham’s God. There is thus what we might call a con-

⁴²Westermann, *Genesis 12–26*, p. 152.

⁴³Paul corrected the false views of the citizens of Lystra on this score when he pointed them to the true source of the everyday blessings they enjoyed (Acts 14:15–18). His address was an emergency response and quickly cut short, but we can presume that with more time and less volatile circumstances he would have moved on from the story of creation to the rest of the biblical story that climaxed in the resurrection of Jesus.

fessional dimension to the anticipated blessing of the nations. They will be blessed as they come to acknowledge the God of Abraham and “bless themselves” in and through him.

In chapter seven we will consider the further vital importance of the qualifier *in you* or *through you*, which points to this particularity. But at this point we simply observe that the intention of God at this climax of his promise to Abraham is not merely that all nations should be blessed (purely passive) in some unspecified way, regardless of their relationship with Abraham. Or that they would be blessed in some independent way unrelated to what God has just declared he will do for and through Abraham. No, the combined force of the crucial word “in you,” along with the *self-involving* form of the verb, shows that God’s intention is that nations will self-consciously share in the blessing of Abraham through deliberate appropriation of it for themselves. This is not just randomly sprinkled blessing. It is a deliberate act that will activate God’s promise of blessing for them. The nations will indeed be blessed as Abraham was, but only because they will have turned to the only source of blessing, Abraham’s God, and identified themselves with the story of Abraham’s people. They will know the God of Abraham.

I referred to this as a missiological perspective because it certainly connects with a major emphasis that we explored in chapter four, namely, the biblical God’s will to be known for who he is. The creation must know its Creator. The nations must know their Judge and Savior. And this is the God who, as Hebrews tells us, “is not ashamed to be called *their* God”—that is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Heb 11:16). And the story of Abraham looks both backward to the great narrative of creation and forward to the even greater narrative of redemption. And the vocabulary of blessing is the umbilical cord between both traditions. It is the blessing of God that links creation and redemption, for redemption is the restoration of the original blessing inherent in creation.

So the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham comes about not merely as nations are blessed in some general sense but only as they specifically come to know the whole biblical grand story, of which Abraham is a key pivot. This is profoundly important for mission. One of the reasons for the appalling shallowness and vulnerability of much that passes for the growth of the church around the world is that people are coming to some kind of instrumental faith in a God they see as powerful, with some connection to Jesus, but a Jesus disconnected from his scriptural roots. They have not been challenged at the level of their deeper worldview by coming to know God *in and through the story that is launched by Abraham*. Paul had not left his converts vulnerable at this level but had taught them clearly and reminds them in Galatians that their faith in *Christ*

had embedded them in the faith and lineage of *Abraham*. The living God they had turned to from their dead idols had indeed announced the gospel in advance through Abraham, and they could count themselves blessed in Abraham, through his seed, the Messiah Jesus.

And following Paul, of course, we who read this text as Christian believers know that its fulfillment is rooted in that same Jesus. Its multinational vista is possible only through Christ. So, to widely diverse representatives of the nations, the Gentile believers in the churches around the Mediterranean, Paul could say what he said to the Galatians: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26, 29).

Calvin used this christological hermeneutic as an interesting way of deciding the exegetical problem over the precise rendering of the main verb in Genesis 12:3, for he was clearly aware of the different grammatical options. In the end he argues that since we know that it is in and through Christ that the nations are in fact being blessed, and since Christ was "in the loins" of Abraham, we can understand God's promise to Abraham in the fuller sense implied by the passive "be blessed." Commenting on that final phrase of Genesis 12:3, Calvin writes:

Should anyone choose to understand this passage in a restricted sense, as a proverbial way of speaking (those who will bless their children or their friends will be called after the name of Abram), let him enjoy his opinion; for the Hebrew phrase will bear the interpretation that Abram will be called a signal example of happiness.

But I extend the meaning further because I suppose the same thing to be promised in this place that God later repeats more clearly (see Genesis 22:18). And the authority of Paul brings me to this point as well [Gal. 3:17]. . . . We must understand that the blessing was promised to Abram in Christ, when he was coming into the land of Canaan. Therefore, God (in my judgment) pronounces that all nations should be blessed in his servant Abram because Christ was included in his body. In this manner, he not only intimates that Abram would be an *example*, but a *cause* of blessing. . . . [Paul] concludes that the covenant of salvation that God made with Abram is neither stable nor firm except in Christ. I therefore thus interpret the present place as saying that God promises to his servant Abram that blessing that will afterwards flow to all people.⁴⁴

Conclusion

How then are we to answer the question posed at the start of this section: What is the meaning of "blessing"? It is obvious that Genesis 12:1-3 (as indeed Genesis

⁴⁴Calvin, *Genesis*, pp. 112-13.

itself as a book) is saturated with concern for blessing. But what do the rich and resonant phrases mean and where do they lead (for the horizon of the text is very distant indeed)?

We have seen that blessing is initially and strongly connected with creation and all the good gifts that God longs for people to enjoy in his world—abundance, fruitfulness and fertility, long life, peace, and rest. Yet at the same time, these things are to be enjoyed within the context of healthy relationships with God and with others. Yet such relationships have been radically fractured by the events described in Genesis 3—11. How then can such blessing be enjoyed apart from the redemptive intervention of God?

Then we observed that the combination of command and promise in the text gave it a strongly missional dynamic, while its orientation toward the future made it a programmatic address to history. In a creation spoiled by sin and the curse, history will be a hope-filled story of how God will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him (Gen 18:18). If that is the mission of God, however, we quickly observed that it also demands the faith and obedience of Abraham, and the subsequent commitment of his people to the ethical demands of the covenant. So the Abrahamic covenant is a moral agenda for God's people as well as a mission statement by God.

Finally, we stand amazed at the universal thrust (repeated five times) of the Abrahamic promise—that ultimately people of all nations will find blessing through Abraham. And we confess, with Paul, that it is of the essence of the biblical gospel, first announced to Abraham, that God has indeed made such blessing for all nations available through the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the seed of Abraham. In Christ alone, through the gospel of his death and resurrection, stands the hope of blessing for all nations.

God's Particular People

Chosen for All

Our initial survey of the election of Abraham in chapter six focused mainly on blessing—that he was chosen to be blessed and to be a blessing. We move on now to unpack more fully the implications of both parts of that famous bottom line of the Abrahamic covenant, immortalized by Paul as “the gospel in advance,” that “through you all nations on earth will be blessed.”

The tension between the universality of the goal (*all nations*) and the particularity of the means (*through you*) is right there from the very beginning of Israel's journey through the pages of the Old Testament. It is a tension that is fundamental to our biblical theology of mission, so we need to explore both poles of it further now. It is also a tension that has generated many unsatisfactory attempts to resolve it in either direction—by drawing from it a kind of universalism that loses touch with the particularity of God's redemptive work through Israel and Christ, or by accusing Israel of a chauvinistic exclusivism that neglected God's wider concern for other nations. We can only respond to such distortions by turning to the biblical text in all its breadth and depth—and that is the rationale underlying the nature of this chapter as a wide-ranging biblical journey. As we embark on it, we recall that our purpose throughout is to discern how thoroughly the mission of God is woven into the whole tapestry of Scripture. That mission of God unquestionably has a universal horizon and an equally unquestionably particular historical method. Both are crucial in unlocking the Bible's grand narrative.

Universality—Old Testament Echoes of Abraham

Once we move beyond the narratives of the ancestors of Israel in Genesis to the

narratives of their national history from the exodus onward, the narrator focuses the attention of the reader on God's specific dealings with the nation of Israel itself. Those elements of the Abrahamic promise that were most important within the history of Old Testament Israel are given prominence: the growth of the "great nation" in spite of threats and opposition, the establishment of a covenant relationship of blessing between YHWH and Israel, the acquisition of the Promised Land. In all of these things (posterity, covenant and land), the faith of Israel (particularly as expressed in Deuteronomy) looked back to Abraham and praised God for his faithfulness in keeping these dimensions of his promise to their fathers.

But what about "all nations on earth"? Outside Genesis, with its fivefold reference to God's mission of blessing all nations through Abraham and his seed, there is much less frequent mention of this final clause of the promise. Nevertheless, it is certainly not lost altogether, and we need now to survey those places in the rest of the Old Testament that directly or indirectly refer to this universal aspect of God's intention for the world beyond the boundaries of Israel itself. We will be looking for texts in which either phrases such as "all nations" or "all the earth" are used in connection with God's saving purposes, or where the theme of blessing occurs with a wider-than-Israel perspective. Later, in chapter fourteen, we will explore more widely and in greater depth the theme of "the nations" in general in the Old Testament. Our focus here is not on all texts that refer in any way to YHWH and the nations but on those that articulate some element of universality, either directly or implicitly echoing the Abraham promise. After we have followed the trajectory of Abrahamic universality through the Old Testament, we will then observe its impact when it lands in the New Testament among those who saw in Jesus Christ the final key to its fulfillment.

The Pentateuch. *Exodus 9:13-16.* "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But 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."

This statement to Pharaoh comes within the narrative of the plagues. As we saw in chapter three (p. 76), a major subplot of that narrative is that Pharaoh should come to know who God is. He will ultimately know that YHWH (whom he refused to acknowledge) is God, just as much in Egypt as anywhere else on earth. But here a wider knowing than Pharaoh's alone is envisioned. Not only

must Pharaoh realize that there is no God like YHWH “in all the earth” but also all the earth must hear about the power and name of YHWH. Whether they would do so as an experience of YHWH’s blessing or of his judgment would depend on whether they followed Pharaoh’s example or learned enough from it to choose a better way. Pharaoh thus becomes here a classic illustration of the protective line in the Abrahamic covenant—“the one who treats you with contempt, I will curse” (Gen 12:3, author’s translation).

The missiological significance of this text is observed (though not with this terminology) by Terence Fretheim in his perceptive comment:

Here God’s ultimate goal of the creation comes into view. In three “knowing” texts (8:22; 9:14, 30) the relationship of God to the entire earth is emphasized. Yahweh is no local god, seeking to best another local deity. The issue for God *finally* is that God’s name be declared (*sapar*) to the entire earth. This verb is used elsewhere for the proclamation of God’s good news (e.g. Ps. 78:3-4; Isa. 43:21). This is no perfunctory understanding of the relationship of non-Israelites to Yahweh. To say that God is God of all the earth means that all its people are God’s people; they should know the name of this God. Hence God’s purposes in these events are not focussed simply on the redemption of Israel. *God’s purposes span the world*. God is acting in such a public way so that God’s good news can be proclaimed to everyone (see Rom. 9:17).¹

Exodus 19:5-6. “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. [For (or indeed)] the whole earth is mine, and you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”²

This is a key missiological text to which we will return more than once as we work our way through this book. It is as pivotal in the book of Exodus as Genesis 12:1-3 is in Genesis. It is the hinge between chapters 1-18, describing God’s gracious initiative of redemption (the exodus), and chapters 20-40, which describe the making of the covenant, the giving of the law, and the building of the tabernacle. Like Genesis 12:1-3 it also has a combination of imperative (how Israel must behave) and promise (what Israel will be among the rest of the nations).

The universal perspective, for which we enlist it here, is explicit in the double phrase *all nations* and *the whole earth*. Although the action is taking place be-

¹Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 125.

²I have changed the NIV text at the beginning of the second sentence. This is a much more natural rendering of the Hebrew conjunction *kî* here—rather than “although” (NIV). The point is not “in spite of” but rather “because of” the fact that the whole earth belongs to God, Israel will have a priestly and holy function, and is called to exercise the positive role of mediating God to the nations.

tween YHWH and Israel alone at Mount Sinai, God has not forgotten his wider mission of blessing the rest of the nations of the earth through this particular people whom he has redeemed. Furthermore, since the exodus itself had been explicitly motivated by God's faithfulness to his promises to Abraham (Ex 2:24; 6:6-8), the full weight of that great theme in Genesis is echoed here. The universality of God's ultimate purpose for all the earth is not lost sight of. Indeed, this verse sets the rest of the Pentateuch in its light, just as Genesis 12:1-3 did for the rest of Genesis.

The whole Sinai experience—including the giving of the law, the making of the covenant, the building of the tabernacle and even including the renewal of the covenant with the following generation on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy—is prefaced by this text.

The significance of this great covenant event for Israel's future, the privileges and the obligations, are contained with the introductory speech of YHWH, Exodus 19:3-6. In this nutshell we find a summary of the purpose of the covenant, presented from the mouth of YHWH himself. Here is the given goal of Israel's future.³

And that "given goal" is explicitly universal in outlook. Once again, the missiological significance is noticed by Fretheim: "the phrases relate to a mission that encompasses God's purposes for the entire world. *Israel is commissioned to be God's people on behalf of the earth which is God's.*"⁴

Numbers 23:8-10.

How can I curse
 those whom God has not cursed?
 How can I denounce
 those whom the LORD has not denounced?
 From the rocky peaks I see them,
 from the heights I view them.
 I see people who live apart
 and do not consider themselves one of the nations.
 Who can count the dust of Jacob
 or number the fourth part of Israel?
 Let me die the death of the righteous,
 and may my end be like theirs!

³Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology*, JSOT Supplement Series 305 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 35.

⁴Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 212. Likewise, John Durham recognizes the universal implications of the role given here to Israel: "Israel as a 'kingdom of priests' is Israel committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh's Presence." John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), p. 263.

Balaam's oracle does not quite express the universality of the climax of the Abrahamic covenant, but it certainly is an echo of that text. His refusal to curse Israel may have been under divine constraint, but there was an element of self-preservation in it too. The distinctiveness of Israel's role among the nations is also referred to, as is the expectation of their numerical growth like "dust"—a clear echo of part of God's promise to Abraham (Gen 13:16). And finally, Balaam probably echoes the final line of Genesis 12:3 by wishing to be like Israel. "In this wish he may be invoking upon himself the kind of blessing found in Gen. 12:3, that through Abraham and his offspring, all nations of the earth will bless themselves."⁵

YHWH had promised that Abraham's family would become as numerous as the grains of sandy soil in the land (Gen 13:16; 28:14); Balaam testifies that this has come about (Num 23:10). YHWH had promised that people would pray for blessing like Abraham's (Gen 12:3); Balaam does so (Num 23:10).⁶

Balaam's next oracle is even more emphatic in affirming the blessing of God on Israel, which no human sorcery can reverse (Num 23:18-24), and his third oracle virtually quotes God's original words to Abraham (Num 24:9).

Tragically, what Balak failed to achieve in three chapters (Num 22—24) by hiring Balaam to bring God's curse on Israel, the Israelites managed to achieve in one (Num 25) by their own ill-disciplined surrender to the temptations of immorality and idolatry. Numbers 31:16 suggests that Balaam had a hand in this, in spite of his Spirit-inspired oracles, so that his hope that his death might be among the righteous and blessed like Israel was doomed by his actions (Num 31:8).

Deuteronomy 28:9-10. "The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you."

The rest of the nations do not feature very much in Deuteronomy, though when they do, it is of considerable missiological interest. For example, one of the early motivations for obeying the law is that Israel would then become a

⁵Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 472, (and similarly most commentators).

⁶John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 471. Goldingay further points to the universal dimension of the episode in the way it reverts to the creational theme of blessing, after the immediately preceding narratives of redemption: "The reappearance of the theme also advertizes that the story needs to make the transition back from deliverance talk to blessing talk. Israel's story (the world's story) is not ultimately about deliverance but about blessing" (ibid.).

visible example to the nations of the nearness of God and of wise and just social structures (Deut 4:6-8). This text comes within the great chapter of blessings and curses by which the covenant was sanctioned. The blessings listed in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, as elsewhere in the book, follow the pattern of blessing already seen clearly in Genesis. Alongside those standard marks of blessing, however, this text points to a wider effect. There will be universal recognition of YHWH's blessing on Israel and thereby universal recognition of YHWH's own name. This can only happen on the assumption of Israel's obedience to the covenant, by living as God's "holy people" (which echoes Ex 19:5-6). "The thought belongs to the Deuteronomic theme of Israel as a witness to the nations by reason of Yahweh's blessing and their keeping his commands (cf. 4:6-8; 26:19)."⁷

The historical books. The Deuteronomistic History follows the general ethos of the book of Deuteronomy by being primarily taken up with the story of Israel itself and God's dealings with them within the terms of his covenant promises and threats. However, the wider significance of Israel within God's purposes for the rest of the world does shine through from time to time—often either in editorial comments or in the mouths of key characters at critical moments in the story.⁸ Most of the related passages speak of all the earth *coming to know* YHWH rather than explicitly referring to them *being blessed*. This is parallel to the way Israel itself had been granted its great historical experiences of YHWH in action: "So that you might know that the LORD is God; beside him there is no other" (Deut 4:35). All nations on earth will eventually come to know what Israel knows. But since the Abrahamic promise of being blessed, or blessing oneself, through Abraham presupposes knowing Abraham's God, and since knowing YHWH as God is unquestionably one of the greatest blessings enjoyed by Israel, there is a theological affinity between these "knowing" texts and the Abrahamic "blessing" promise, even if it is not so explicit as elsewhere.

Joshua 4:23-24. "The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God."

Joshua here puts the crossing of the Jordan on the same paradigmatic level

⁷J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 404-5.

⁸Jonathan Rowe provides a fascinating study of the language of universality and its common linkage with the condemnation of idolatry in the Deuteronomistic History, and offers a missiological perspective on the relevant material. Jonathan Y Rowe, "Holy to the Lord: Universality in the Deuteronomic History and Its Relationship to the Authors' Theology of History" (M.A. diss., All Nations Christian College, 1997).

as the Exodus crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Not only did it accomplish a major step forward in the saving history of Israel, it would also, and for that reason, form part of the education of the nations by which they too would know something of the power of YHWH.

1 Samuel 17:46. “This day the LORD will hand you over to me. . . . And the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.”

David puts his imminent defeat of Goliath in the same universal frame of reference. Youthful hyperbole? Perhaps, but the narrator doubtless meant it to be taken as sober theological comment.

The purpose of David's victory is not simply to save Israel or to defeat the Philistines. The purpose is the glorification of Yahweh in the eyes of the world. . . . This is an extraordinary speech by David, with a disciplined and eloquent theological substance. David is the one who bears witness to the rule of Yahweh. In so doing he calls Israel away from its imitation of the nations and calls the nations away from their foolish defiance of Yahweh. In a quite general sense this is a “missionary speech,” summoning Israel and the nations to fresh faith in Yahweh.⁹

It is worth noting that in his eschatological vision, a later prophet envisioned “a remnant” of Goliath's people, the Philistines, being so absorbed into the future people of God that they would even become leaders in the city and state that David went on to establish (Zech 9:7).

2 Samuel 7:25-26, 29. “And now, LORD God, keep for ever the promise you have made concerning your servant and his house. Do as you promised, so that your name will be great for ever. Then men will say, ‘The LORD Almighty is God over Israel!’ . . . Now be pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue for ever in your sight; for you, O Sovereign LORD, have spoken, and with your blessing the house of your servant will be blessed for ever.”

David's response to God's promise to him regarding the establishing of his “house” seems to draw on the Abrahamic language. There are other parallels between David and Abraham in the biblical narrative (e.g., the secure possession of the land promised to Abraham, the promise of a great name [2 Sam 7:9], the promise of a son). Here David reflects God's promise of a great name back to God himself in the prayer that God's name will be widely honored, and uses the double language of blessing.

1 Kings 8:41-43, 60-61. “As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for men will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—

⁹Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 132.

when he comes and prays towards his temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you as do your own people Israel.

“. . . so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God and that there is no other. But your hearts [Israel] must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time.”

This is the most remarkable of all the passages with a universal vision in the historical books, “possibly the most marvelously universalistic passage in the Old Testament.”¹⁰ It is all the more noteworthy since it occurs in the context of what might be regarded as the most particular focus of the faith of Israel—the temple. Yet here, at its dedication, Solomon’s prayer envisions the blessing of foreigners and the spreading fame of YHWH.

The *assumptions* Solomon makes in pressing his request are revealing. It is *assumed* that people will hear of the reputation of YHWH. It is *assumed* that people from afar will be attracted to come and worship Israel’s God for themselves. It is *assumed* that Israel’s God can and will hear the prayers of foreigners. All these assumptions are important theological foundations in any summary of the missiological significance of the faith and history of Old Testament Israel. And it is a missiological reading of a text like this which highlights the theological significance of its assumptions.

The *content* of his request is no less surprising. Though Israelite worshipers rejoiced in the wonderful way their God answered their prayers (or protested vigorously when he apparently failed to), and even recognized it as a mark of their own distinctiveness among the nations (Deut 4:7), at no time did God ever promise in so many words to do for Israel *whatever they might ask of him* in prayer (hence the newness of the promise Jesus made to his disciples to this effect). Yet here Solomon asks exactly that for the “foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel.” Solomon asks God to do for foreigners what God had not even guaranteed to do for Israel. And the consideration with which Solomon seeks to persuade God to do that is equally impressive: so that the knowledge and fear of the Lord should spread to *all the peoples of the earth*. Though Abraham is not mentioned, we can picture him nodding in agreement.

In the second text (1 Kings 8:60-61), Solomon is addressing the people, not God. But his concern is the same. This time, however, we notice the strong connection between mission and ethics—the mission of God to be known to all peoples and the ethical condition that Israel must live in obedience to God, just

¹⁰Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary 12 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), p. 126.

as Abraham did. The dynamic connection here is the same as in Genesis 18:18-19; 22:16-18; 26:4-5.

2 Kings 19:19. “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.”

This is Hezekiah’s prayer, seeking to motivate God to deliver Israel from the Assyrians by reminding him of the universal acknowledgement of YHWH’s sole deity that will result. It is basically the same, only on a greater scale, as the confidence of young David facing Goliath.

The psalms. In Israel’s worship we find the richest expressions of their faith and theology, their hopes, fears, and visions of the future. There are many psalms that refer to the nations in one way or another, and we will look at some of them more systematically in chapter fourteen. Here our attention is only on those that include phrases which express the universality of Israel’s expectation, phrases which deliberately or unselfconsciously echo the language of God’s promise to Abraham.

Psalms 22:27-28.

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,
for dominion belongs to the LORD
and he rules over the nations.

This universal affirmation stands out in a psalm in which the first half expresses the most intense suffering of the worshiper. But out of that experience, he comes to praise God for his expected deliverance (vv. 22-24). Then, as so often in the psalms, the individual concerns of the worshiper suddenly broaden out on to a much wider horizon. From the depth of personal suffering he moves to a breadth of faith that encompasses polar opposites: the poor (v. 26) and the rich (v. 29), those who have already died (v. 29) and those not yet even born (vv. 30-31). The saving work of God will thus embrace all classes in society and all generations in history. In the midst of this comes the echo of Abrahamic universality in verse 27, using both of the terms found in the Genesis texts: “all the families [*mīšpəḥōt*] of the nations [*gōyim*].”

When we remember that Jesus died with the first and last lines of this psalm on his lips (from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” to “It is finished” = “He [God] has done it”), we can see the christological connection between the two halves of the psalm. Otherwise they are so jarringly different in tone that many commentators have had difficulty believing the psalm is a unity

and have exercised some critical surgery on it. But Jesus found in the first half of the psalm the words and metaphors that so vividly described his own actual sufferings, and found in the second half the assurance that his death would not be in vain. For as the rest of the New Testament makes clear, it would be through his death and resurrection that God would open the way for the universal worship of all the nations to become a reality. For this reason, a christological reading of the psalm connects it both backward to the Abrahamic promise it embodies and forward to the missional universality it anticipates.

Psalm 47:9.

The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted.

This psalm begins on a universal note, inviting “all the nations” (*kōl hā‘ammim*) to clap in praise of YHWH (Ps 47:2). The original context of the psalm may perhaps have been an occasion of celebration after military victory, in which representatives of the conquered nations are required to join in the worship of YHWH, the victorious God. This might give a straightforward historical meaning to verse 9—the leaders of the conquered nations on some unspecified occasion have been assembled with the victorious Israelites to do their homage to Israel’s God.¹¹ However, its inclusion in the Psalter gives it significance beyond such a limited hypothetical occasion and endows it with an eschatological perspective.

The second line of verse 9 is remarkable, if we can take the Masoretic Text as it stands. It simply reads “The leaders of the nations gather, the people of the God of Abraham.” This implies an identification of the leaders of the nations with Israel. Because YHWH is king over all the earth, so that all the kings of the earth belong ultimately to him, the psalmist can take a huge leap and envision the nations actually becoming one with the people of Abraham’s God. So they gather together as that people to worship that God. Critical emendation has suggested inserting “with” before “the people,”¹² slightly weakening the effect and preserving the distinction: “the leaders of the peoples gather *with* the people of the God of Abraham.” But even if this were the correct reading, it is still making

¹¹This is suggested by Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983), pp. 348–50.

¹²I.e., inserting *‘im* before *‘am*, and assuming that it may have dropped out by haplography. The LXX has read the word as if pointed *‘im* anyway, rendering the phrase “with the God of Abraham.”

a noteworthy statement about the faith of Israel that ultimately the reign of God over all the earth will be a cause for applauding praise among all the nations. "Israel doesn't rejoice in its unique status but, rather, that her God has become king over all the earth and that the representatives of the peoples gather together as the people of Israel's God. The world becomes one in the oneness of Israel's God."¹³

Psalm 67:1-2.

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine upon us,
Selah
that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

Some Israelite worshiper, doubtless having heard the Aaronic blessing many times from the lips of priests (Num 6:22-27), decided to turn it into a prayer. The opening two lines unmistakably recall Numbers 6:25. But he was not content to leave it as a prayer for himself or for Israel. He turns the blessing inside out and directs it outward to the nations, praying that the blessings of the knowledge and salvation of God, hitherto enjoyed uniquely by Israel, should be showered on "all nations" and "all peoples" so that they too would joyfully praise God. Several key things are combined in this psalm:

- experiencing blessing so that others should be blessed
- the just rule of God and the nations' ready submission to his guidance
- spiritual blessing and material harvest of the land
- the particular (God will bless us) and the universal (all the ends of the earth will fear him)

All of these point to a strongly Abrahamic undercurrent in the theology of the psalmist.¹⁴

Psalm 72:17.

May his name endure for ever,
may it continue as long as the sun.

¹³James Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations: Blessing and World History," *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 393.

¹⁴"This psalm seems to involve two major subjects: blessing and the spread of life-giving knowledge of Yahweh to the people of the earth." Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51—100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas: Word, 1990), p. 158. Though Tate does not observe the Abrahamic bass line beneath this melodic duet.

All nations will be blessed through him,
and they will call him blessed.

The allusion to the Abrahamic covenant is unmistakable here. I mentioned in relation to 2 Samuel 7 that there are thematic connections between Abraham and David. Here they are extended to the king in the line of David, the object of this prayer. The prayer combines the *creational* blessings of fruitfulness and abundance with the *covenantal* blessings of justice and righteousness (both of which we have seen to be included in the Abrahamic tradition). As a result, the kingly figure is not only the object of universal submission ("All kings will bow down to him / and all nations will serve him" [Ps 72:11]) but also the object of prayers for blessing ("May people ever pray for him / and bless him all day long" [Ps 72:15]). The prayer that "his name may endure for ever" echoes God's promise regarding Abraham's name. And the affirmation of universal and mutual blessing in verse 17 ("be blessed" and "call him blessed") is equally clearly Abrahamic. The final verse of the psalm celebrates the ultimate universality of God's mission within creation that "the whole earth be filled with his glory" (Ps 72:19).

Setting this psalm alongside 2 Samuel 7, we can see that the purpose of God's covenant with David and his house fits within the wider framework of the purpose of God's covenant with Abraham. God's mission is that all the nations of the earth should count themselves blessed through Abraham and his seed, Israel. At a historical level the monarchy within Israel must fit within that broader mission of Israel itself, in the same way as the Mosaic covenant did (as we will see in chap. 11). But in a more eschatological sense it will be the reign of God himself that will bring about the full restoration of all that God intends for humanity within creation. And of that reign, the Davidic king in Zion becomes the model and messianic prototype. The universal blessing of the nations (as promised to Abraham) will come about through the universal reign of God and his anointed (as promised to David [cf. Ps 2]), whom the New Testament identifies as Jesus of Nazareth.

The opening words of the New Testament take on even richer significance, then, as we embark there on the story of "the genesis of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1, author's translation). Here, in every possible way, we are being introduced to a person and a story of *universal* significance, the story of one who inherits and embodies both Abrahamic and Davidic promise. He then is also the one who, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, passes on the missional task to Abraham's spiritual heirs, the Messiah's disciples.

Psalm 86:9.

All the nations you have made
 will come and worship before you, O Lord;
 they will bring glory to your name.

Although the point being made here is similar to those above, the context in which it stands contrasts considerably with the previous text. Whereas Psalm 72 is a deliberate and extensive piece of acclamatory theologizing around the Davidic monarchy, Psalm 86 (like Ps 22) is a cry of personal struggle in a time of opposition and danger. In a bid to motivate God to hear and answer him, the psalmist appeals to the knowledge of God he has from the exodus traditions (vv. 6 and 15 allude to Ex 34:6, while v. 8 echoes Ex 15:11) and here also to the Genesis tradition of “all nations.” The precise language of blessing is not used, but it was clearly understood in Israel that worship was a *response* to God’s blessing (not a means of manipulating it for one’s own benefit). So the assumption of our text is that the nations will come to worship and glorify YHWH *because they will have already experienced his saving blessing*.

The subtext, then, of the implied logic in the psalmist’s appeal is that if all the nations are going to have something to praise God for, it should not be too difficult for God to sort out the psalmist’s personal problems and give him a more immediate cause for praise (Ps 86:12). The psalmists were not opposed to a spot of realized eschatology. Their challenge to God was “if this is what you intend ultimately to do for the whole earth, an advance deposit in relation to this particular crisis would not come amiss. Now would be good.”

The Abrahamic promise thus becomes not just a majestic vista of the ultimate mission of God but a very potent engine of personal hopefulness in the immediate saving power of God. The combination of appeal to the exodus (looking back) and the promise to Abraham (looking forward) produced a powerful appeal for help in the present. “God if you did that in the past, and are going to do that in the future, then why not repeat the past and anticipate the future here and now in the present?”

Psalm 145:8-12.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
 slow to anger and rich in love.
 The LORD is good to all;
 he has compassion on all he has made.

All you have made will praise you, O LORD;
 your saints will extol you.

They will tell of the glory of your kingdom
 and speak of your might,
 so that all men may know of your mighty acts
 and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

Universality breathes through this wonderful psalm. The word *all* or *every* in Hebrew (*kōl*) occurs seventeen times like a chiming bell, from “every day” in verse 2, to “every creature” in verse 21. It is worth reading the psalm to count each occurrence and marvel at the incredible range of all these affirmations.

Once again we find an Israelite psalmist drawing on the great traditional language of Israel's faith, and then universalizing it.¹⁵ This is clearest in the transition from verse 8 to verse 9. Verse 8 virtually quotes YHWH's self-description at Mount Sinai (Ex 34:6). In that context it was Israel who had just experienced the truth of these words (and had most needed to), and it was to Israel (through Moses) that they were spoken. But verse 9 immediately universalizes it: “The LORD is good *to all*; / he has compassion *on all* he has made.” This is then repeated with variations at verses 13 and 17, with many other aspects of the great affirmation being touched on in the surrounding verses, as applied to needy humans and hungry animals.

The drama of Exodus (God's saving, faithful, generous, providing love) is being played out in the amphitheater of Genesis (the whole breadth of the created order, from all humanity to “every living thing”). The only exception in this litany to the universality of God's love are the wicked who choose, in their wickedness, to refuse it. Their destiny is destruction (Ps 145:20b). The half-verse acceptance of this sad truth matches the recognition within the Abrahamic promise that even against the background of a fivefold repetition of God's desire to bless, there would still be “the one who disdains you” (Gen 12:3) whom God would curse. The curse and final destruction of the enemies of God's people, of those who choose to remain wicked in the face of the profligate outpouring of his love, is of course a sad but necessary dimension of God's own protection of the love that longs to bring blessing to all. It is the implication of one part of the Abrahamic covenant.

The prophets.

Isaiah 19:24-25. “In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’ ”

¹⁵The same universalizing dynamic happens in Psalm 33. Note the transition between vv. 4-5a and v. 5b, and between v. 12 and vv. 13-14.

Personally, I find this one of the most breathtaking pronouncements of any prophet, and certainly one of the missiologically most significant texts in the Old Testament. Detailed exegesis of the chapter can wait until chapter fourteen. But for our immediate purpose here, we take note of the Abrahamic allusions. The identity of Israel will be merged with that of Egypt and Assyria, such that the Abrahamic promise is not only fulfilled *in* them but *through* them.

The two verbal references to the text of Genesis 12:1-3 are (1) the use of the piel of *brk* in verse 25 ("The LORD Almighty will bless them," matching the same form as "I will bless you" in Gen 12:2b), and (2) the phrase "will be a blessing" (*hyh* with *bērākā* [v. 24]). In Genesis 12:2d this combination is in the form of an imperative with intention ("be a blessing" or "so that you will be a blessing"). In Isaiah 19:24 it is a prophetic affirmation about Israel, Egypt and Assyria combined (they will together "be a blessing in the midst of the earth").

So these foreign nations come not only to *experience* blessing but to *be* "a blessing on the earth." In other words, both dynamic movements in God's word to Abraham are at work here. The recipients of the Abrahamic blessing become the agents of it. The principle that those who are blessed are to be the means of blessing others is not confined to Israel alone, as if Israel would forever be the exclusive transmitters of a blessing that could only be passively received by the rest from their hand. No, the Abrahamic promise is a self-replicating gene. Those who receive it are immediately transformed into those whose privilege and mission it is to pass it on to others.

The identity of Israel is already being redefined and extended in the direction that the New Testament will bring to climactic clarity in Christ. The multinational nature of that community of people through whom God plans to bless all nations of the earth is here already prefigured. So also is the similarly self-replicating nature of Christ's mandate to his disciples to go and reproduce their own discipleship among the nations, "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Or, as we might add, "blessing them as the Lord has blessed you." Yet again, the Abrahamic promise can stake its claim to be not only the "gospel in advance" but even more so, the Great Commission in advance.

Once again we find that a missiological reading of a text like this points us first backward to the Abrahamic promise and the inherent universality that it programmed into the genes of Israel, then forward to the messianic fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and then forward yet again to its missional implications for those who are disciples from all nations to be agents of blessing to all nations, "a blessing on the earth."

Isaiah 25:6-8.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and finest of wines.
On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.

Although the connection with the Abrahamic promise is much weaker here than in the previous text, consisting only of the universalizing phrases “all peoples” and “all the earth,” it does have another dimension that links it to the Genesis tradition—the promise of the final destruction of death itself. Genesis 3—11 certainly portrays death as the primary result of sin, even if there is a mystery over the precise link between God’s warning that it would be and the actual way it entered human experience. The paired expressions “curse and death” and “blessing and life” are familiar (e.g., the strong use of them in Deut 11; 30). The longing for God to lift the curse is a longing for human life to be released from the sweat and toil on a cursed earth that ends finally in death, as is shown by Lamech’s (sadly futile) hope at the naming of his son, Noah, after the long line of death in Genesis 5. So the reader of Genesis 12:1-3 would certainly know that if God’s blessing is ultimately to remove God’s curse, then it must deal with the problem of death. This word in Isaiah, then, assures us that this will ultimately be the case. And although the closing line turns this into a promise for “his people” (the ending of their disgrace throughout the world), the body of the vision applies to humanity as a whole in the double use of “all peoples” and “all nations” in v. 7.

Though this text may not have been in his mind, Paul certainly connects the promise of God through Abraham with the triumph of resurrection life over the reign of death in the world, a triumph that (as his gospel so resolutely insisted) is available to people of all nations (see Rom 4:16-17; 5:12-21).

Isaiah 45:22-23.

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 and strength."

This classic text expressing God's appeal to the nations comes in the midst of those pulsating chapters of Isaiah in which the same nations and their gods are comprehensively defeated "in court" and in the arena of the control and interpretation of history (Is 40—48). Yet God's ultimate purpose is not the destruction of the nations but their salvation. That, however, can only come about when they turn to him, for he, YHWH, is the only saving God available to them, by virtue of the simple fact that he is the only God, period.

So the invitation here stands in line with the great Abrahamic anticipation of the blessing of the nations, but the connection is somewhat stronger than that. "By myself I have sworn" (v. 23) is a precise verbal repetition of the words that opened the final and most definitive announcement by God of his covenant with Abraham, in Genesis 22:16. That great oath on God's own self is here uttered afresh, in a way that explains further how it can be that "all nations on earth will be blessed." It will happen only as people turn in submission to YHWH, acknowledging him to be sole deity and the exclusive source of righteousness (probably equivalent here to salvation) and strength. We need hardly add that it was this same universality and uniqueness that is unhesitatingly attributed to Jesus by Paul in Philippians 2:10-11 (see p. 108).

Isaiah 48:18-19.

If only you had paid attention to my commands,
 your peace would have been like a river,
 your righteousness like the waves of the sea.
 Your descendants would have been like the sand,
 your children like its numberless grains;
 their name would never be cut off
 nor destroyed from before me.

The echo of Abraham is unmistakable here in the mention of the numberless grains of sand, the promised extent of his progeny. It is also notable that the blessing Israel could have been enjoying by this time is not merely numerical growth but the qualitative and relational blessings of peace and righteousness.

In its immediate context the longing probably refers to the growth of national Israel. The fear of the exiles that they might diminish and die out would remain unfounded. But, in the wider context, the very reason why God would not let Israel perish but, on the contrary, would revive and refertilize them (cf. Is 44:1-5) is that God intended them to be the means of a wider multiplication—the multinational growth of God's people among all nations. The Abrahamic promise of a "great nation" and of "all nations" lies under the surface.

The tone of this passage is divine wistfulness. God is indulging in the very human emotion of "If only . . . then imagine what could be." The reality sadly belied the dream. Or rather, the dream was not yet a reality, because of Israel's continuing rebellion and disobedience. That is how the chapter begins (48:1-4). This highlights again the moral dimension of the Abrahamic covenant. Just as God's promise came to include within itself Abraham's faith and obedience, so for Israel, its fulfillment required the same covenantal response from them. But it had not been forthcoming.

So the link between ethics and mission is here found in an unusual key—the divine "if only." The effect is to show how close that link lies to the heart of God. God longs for innumerable offspring for Abraham (missional growth), but he also longs for the existing offspring of Abraham to walk ethically in the way Abraham modeled (missional obedience). We might reflect on what divine frustration there must be with a church that sometimes lacks both, or with a church that even in its missional enthusiasm for Abrahamic growth in numbers ignores God's demand for Abrahamic growth in ethical commitment to righteousness and justice.

Isaiah 60:12. "For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; / it will be utterly ruined."

This verse comes in the wider context of God's promises to Zion in Isaiah 60—62. The prophet envisions the nations of the world coming over to Israel (personified in Zion) and bringing their riches as tribute. At the same time, Israel is portrayed as priest for the nations, receiving their gifts on YHWH's behalf, as it were, and dispensing the blessing of God in return. This is the role that Exodus 19:5-6 had first articulated for Israel among the nations.

Here, however, in the midst of the concentric poem of Isaiah 60, it is possible that one element from the Abrahamic covenant makes an impact. God had declared that he would bless those who bless Abraham and his seed, but he would curse any who despised Abraham. Those nations, therefore, that bless Zion and Zion's God will find themselves blessed by him. Those who refuse to do so, by contrast, will suffer the curse of God in perishing ruin. It appears that the prophet puts Zion itself in the Abrahamic position. Zion of course, even in these

texts, has become more than the physical city of Jerusalem. It has become a term for the wider people of God and indeed for the very presence and salvation of God himself. So again we find the Abrahamic principle of discrimination operative: Those who willingly surrender to all that God has done in and for Zion will find blessing. Those who resist and refuse, exclude themselves from the sphere of blessing and are left with no alternative but destruction.

Verse 12, then is

the pivotal statement that the nation which does not serve Zion will perish. . . . Thus, the poem centres on the Abrahamic theme that those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed (Gen. 12:3; 27:29). The coming of glorious Zion is the consummation of the world-wide purposes of God. . . . This verse is the dark pivot of the whole poem. Zion really is the key to international destiny, the final form of the Abrahamic system.¹⁶

Jeremiah 4:1-2.

"If you will return, O Israel, return to me,"
declares the LORD.
"If you put your detestable idols out of my sight
and no longer go astray;
and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, 'As surely as the LORD lives,'
then the nations will be blessed by him
and in him they will glory."

Jeremiah was appointed a "prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5), and he has many things to say concerning them, including God's utter fairness in dealing with them, whether in judgment or mercy (Jer 12:14-17; 18:7-10), which we will look at in chapter fourteen. Here, however, he links the destiny of *nations* directly to the response of *Israel* to God. The appeal for Israel genuinely to repent is familiar enough from the surrounding chapters of Jeremiah's early ministry, when he seems to have passionately believed that they could be induced to do so. The emphasis on the truly spiritual and ethical nature of such repentance is also familiar: it must involve the radical rejection of all other gods and idols, and it must combine genuine worship of YHWH with social integrity and justice. So far,

¹⁶J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 493, 496. Eliya Mohol studied the Abrahamic nature of the Zion theme in the whole of Isaiah 56–66 and also affirms the pivotal nature of this verse in the way the possible destinies of the nations are described in these texts. Eliya Mohol, *The Covenantal Rationale for Membership in the Zion Community Envisaged in Isaiah 56–66* (Ph.D. diss., All Nations Christian College, 1998).

we might say, we have heard this before in all the law and the prophets.

Previously, however, we might have expected the conditional phrases of verses 1-2a to be followed by an assurance that God would withdraw his threat of judgment against Israel. If only *Israel* will truly repent, then God will not have to punish *them*. In what Jeremiah actually does say, however, it feels as if he almost impatiently brushes that aside as self-evident ("Yes of course, if *Israel* repents, *Israel* will be blessed") and jumps ahead to a much wider perspective altogether. If Israel will return to their proper place of covenant loyalty and obedience, then God can get on with the job of blessing the *nations*, which is what Israel was called into existence for in the first place. "It becomes clear that true repentance on Israel's part would have far-reaching consequences not merely for Israel but also for mankind in general."¹⁷

The Abrahamic echo in the final two lines is very clear, but the logic of the whole sentence is remarkable.¹⁸ God's mission to the nations is being hindered because of Israel's continuing spiritual and ethical failure. Let Israel return to *their* mission (to be the people of YHWH, worshiping him exclusively and living according to his moral demands), and God can return to *his* mission—blessing the nations.

This interesting perspective sheds fresh light on the full scale and depth of God's problem with Israel. Rebellious Israel were not just an affront to God; they were also a hindrance to the nations. Ezekiel will make the same point even more sharply to Israel in exile. Not surprisingly, then (and for both prophets), the restoration of Israel to covenant obedience and thereby to covenant blessing (peace, fruitfulness, abundance) will make a corresponding impact on the nations also (cf. Jer 33:6-9; Ezek 36:16-36).

The turning of Israel, the dominant motif of the whole liturgy, will mean that the nations will bless themselves (*hithpa'el*) in Yahweh. That will be the people's highest reward; they could not ask for more. The turning of Israel to their true self is inextricably bound with the confessions and praises of the nations.¹⁹

Zechariah 8:13. "As you have been an object of cursing among the nations, O Judah and Israel, so will I save you, and you will be a blessing."

¹⁷J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 213.

¹⁸"The consequence of repentance and reorientation of life is the implementation of God's promise to Abraham. . . . The restoration of covenant thus will benefit not only Judah but the other nations that derive new life from that covenant." Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck up, to Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1—25*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handsel, 1988), pp. 46-47.

¹⁹Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations," p. 396.

The NIV here interprets the literal balance of the phrases “as you were a curse among the nations, . . . so . . . you will be a blessing.” The exile had resulted in Israel being regarded (and indeed described by their prophets) as cursed by their God. Thus they became the subject (not so much the object) of the nations cursing, that is, the comparison one would make in order to declare curse on someone else (“May you be cursed like Israel”). The reversal of this is that God will so save and restore them, and bless them so abundantly (Zech 8:12) that they will be seen to be blessed and therefore the subject of blessing (“May you be blessed like Israel”).²⁰

It seems very probable that the Abrahamic duality of blessing and curse is at work in this saying, since it is oriented toward the nations and their destiny. In the surrounding context Zechariah has several very hopeful words for the ultimate ingathering and salvation of the nations (e.g., Zech 2:10-11; 8:20-22; 14:9, 16).

What we have found, then, in this survey of Old Testament texts, is that the thrust toward universality is more of a feature of the faith, worship and expectations of Israel than we may have thought. Abraham himself may not figure greatly in the rest of the major Old Testament texts, but like Abel, “he being dead yet speaketh” (Heb 11:4 KJV). The legacy of God’s words to him lived on—not only in Israel’s prime worldview certainties (their own election, the gift of the land, the covenantal bond between them and YHWH) but also in that haunting bottom line—“through you all nations will find blessing.” Somehow, sometime, there would be universal effects from these very particular realities. For YHWH, the God of Israel, is also the God of all creation, to whom belong the whole earth and all its nations. Nothing less could adequately define the scope of God’s mission of blessing. No smaller framework can adequately encompass a biblical theology of mission either.

We will have much more to consider when we return to the theme of the nations in chapter fourteen. At this point, however, we must press on to see how the New Testament takes up specifically this theme of the universality of God’s saving purpose through Abraham and his seed. We are not, on this occasion,

²⁰Gordon Wenham uses this text as support for arguing that the expression in Gen 12:2, “be a blessing,” means that Israel is to become such a subject of blessing. *Blessing* is taken as simply a form of words, as in the expression, “say a blessing before the meal.” This would imply that the phrase means much the same as the reflexive understanding of “in you the nations will bless themselves,” i.e., “May you be like Israel” would be what it means to “be a blessing.” However, this seems to me unnecessarily to weaken the intention of the imperative in the Genesis text. While agreeing that this is the most probable sense of “you will be a blessing” in Zech 8:13, it does not seem to fit so well in Is 19:24, where Israel, Egypt and Assyria are said to “be a blessing in the midst of the earth.” See *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), p. 276.

examining all the New Testament has to say about the Jews and Gentiles in general. We will take that up in chapter fifteen. Our focus here is on texts where there is either a direct or indirect use of the Abraham tradition in the direction of the universality of God mission.

Universality—New Testament Echoes of Abraham

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts. *Matthew.* We have noted already how Matthew introduces Jesus as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1).²¹ By combining the Abrahamic and Davidic covenant reminders in this way, Matthew highlights the universal significance of the one who would, as son of Abraham, fulfill what was promised for Abraham’s seed (blessing for all nations), and as son of David, would exercise the prophesied messianic reign over all the earth. By inverting the historical order “Matthew 1:1 moves from Jesus to Abraham, and 1:2-16 moves from Abraham to Jesus, with the result that the name Abraham appears juxtaposed to itself (vv. 1-2). This literary pivot on Abraham turns the spotlight on him.”²² Verse 17 then summarizes the genealogy to make the point even clearer. Jesus is the goal of the story that flows through Abraham and David and includes God’s promises to both.

Matthew 8:11 is the foremost among several places in his Gospel where Matthew indicates the wider significance for the nations of the work of Jesus. Astonished by the faith of the Gentile Roman centurion, a quality of faith that he has not found matched in Israel (cf. the same language in Mk 6:6), Jesus declares, “Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus here makes several very significant moves.

First, he anticipates Paul in making *faith* (which in the story clearly means faith in Jesus) rather than *ethnicity* (physical descent from Abraham) the defin-

²¹I have not included John’s Gospel in this survey because, although its universality is self-evident in the prominent use of “the world” as the object of God’s love, as the scope of Christ’s redemptive action and as the destination of God’s sending of Christ and Christ’s sending of his disciples, it does not seem to be explicitly linked to the Abrahamic promise (though doubtless this was as fundamental to the theology of the author of the Fourth Gospel as to any other Jew of his day). The word *nations* (plural) does not occur in John (though Jn 11:52 does speak of ingathering of others beyond Israel). And the one chapter where Abraham occurs (Jn 8) focuses on Abraham as a contrast to the attitude and behavior of Jesus’ opponents and as a means of affirming the divine claims of Jesus. So the missiological significance of the chapter lies in its christology rather than by reference to the universality of God’s promise to Abraham.

²²Robert L. Brawley, “Reverberations of Abrahamic Covenant Traditions in the Ethics of Matthew,” in *Realia Dei*, ed. Prescott H. Williams and Theodore Hiebert (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), p. 32.

ing criterion for membership in the kingdom of God.

Second, he restores the theme of the great messianic banquet to its properly universal extent. The idea of an eschatological banquet goes back to Isaiah 25:6, which is being prepared by God “for all peoples.” But Jewish apocalyptic tradition by the time of Jesus had narrowed the guest list to Israelites and appointed the patriarchs as hosts. Jesus endorses the latter but says that if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the hosts, then the invitations will go as widely as God’s original promise to them, that is, to all nations.

Third, he rather shockingly uses texts that originally spoke of God gathering in Israelites from exile, “from the east and the west” (Ps 107:3; Is 43:5-6; 49:12), and implies that they will be fulfilled when Gentiles like this centurion arrive at the banquet, whereas some of the original guest list will find themselves excluded for their lack of believing response to him.

Fourth, he implicitly abolishes the food laws that had symbolized the distinction between Israel and the nations. Those laws meant that Jews would not sit at table with Gentiles. Yet Jesus here pictures Gentiles sitting down with the patriarchs themselves, and not an eyebrow is raised. Again, by implication, Jesus anticipates the universalizing, barrier-breaking thrust of the gospel of the kingdom, based on faith, which Peter came to realize through his encounter with Cornelius and which Paul spent his life explaining and defending.

Finally, Matthew closes his Gospel by making quite explicit what the opening of his Gospel had implied—the universality of Jesus Christ and the worldwide extent of the demand for discipleship. The language of the Great Commission is drawn more from Deuteronomy than from Genesis, but it is here in the words of the risen Jesus that we are given the means by which the original Abrahamic commission can be fulfilled, to “Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all the nations on earth will find blessing through you” (Gen 12:1-3).

Luke-Acts. Possibly it was because Luke knew that he, as a Gentile himself, was personally a recipient of the blessing of Abraham through Christ that he seems to have had a soft spot for Abraham.

He opens his Gospel with a series of songs that are saturated in Old Testament allusion. The songs of Mary and of Zechariah both thank God for the renewal of his mercy on his people Israel, and both see this as faithfulness to his promise to Abraham (Lk 1:55, 73). Whereas the focus in those songs is very much on the salvation and restoration of *Israel*, Luke quickly moves on to a universal understanding of the saving significance for *the nations* of what is taking place in the birth of Jesus. Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and sees in him exactly what his name meant: “the Lord is salvation.” But he recognizes that this is a salvation prepared for “all people,” and so Simeon beautifully summarizes the dou-

ble significance of Christ for Israel and for the nations (Lk 2:29-32) in anticipation of the risen Jesus doing exactly the same at the end of the Gospel (Lk 24:46-47). Then Luke provides his own theological interpretation of the preparatory mission of John the Baptist by quoting the familiar words of Isaiah 40:3-5, ending in the universal expectation: "all mankind will see God's salvation" (Lk 3:4-6).

Following that, Luke portrays Satan attempting to subvert the universal mission of Jesus by deceptively pulling it over into his own domain. Jesus is offered "all the kingdoms of the world" and "all their authority and splendor" in exchange for worshipping Satan (Lk 4:5-7). "The devil's temptation to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world parades as the fulfillment of God's promise to give Abraham and his descendants the whole world."²³ But as we know, this universal reign was already promised to the messianic Son (e.g., Ps 2:8-9) and in another sense already belonged to him anyway. The temptation seems to be that Jesus should capitalize on what was rightfully his by enjoying all that international power, wealth and glory *for himself*, whereas the whole point of the Abrahamic promise was that it should be for the *blessing of others*. Thus Luke not only shows Jesus resisting the temptation decisively and in the spirit of Deuteronomistic exclusive loyalty to God, but also gives us the true significance of Abrahamic universality in Acts 3:25-26.

The devil's temptations in Luke are all set up as tests of whether or not God will bless Jesus for his own benefit or not. That is, the devil's Christology . . . embraces an expectation that God will act for Jesus' particular interest. But God's promise to Abraham is to bless all the families of the earth—not Jesus for his own sake, even as a beloved son, but all the families of the earth.²⁴

In four of his narratives Luke makes an explicit connection with Abraham. All of them illustrate the healing, transforming or restoring power of God and seem designed to affirm that this is part of what receiving the blessing of Abraham entails. All of them relate to characters who were in some way excluded from normal life in the community of Israel by demonic bondage, poverty, social contempt or illness. These four narratives are

- Luke 13:10-16. The healing on the sabbath of a crippled woman. Jesus describes her as in bondage to Satan but nevertheless "a daughter of Abraham" and therefore a proper candidate for healing on the sabbath.
- Luke 16:19-31. The story of the poor beggar Lazarus, who on death is carried

²³Robert L. Brawley, "For Blessing All Families of the Earth: Covenant Traditions in Luke-Acts," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22 (1995): 21.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.

to Abraham's side, where his sufferings are over. In this story Jesus employs Abraham as a character, whose climactic words point to the significance of the Law and the Prophets as the God-given and unmistakably clear instructions on how people should exercise justice and mercy. Abraham here testifies to what he himself (according to Genesis) had observed in his own obedient walk with God. The irony in the story is that the rich man might have been thought by his contemporaries to be manifestly enjoying the blessing of Abraham. But not so. He is not walking as Abraham did, nor keeping "the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just" (Gen 18:19). So his destiny is to see Abraham but only far away across an unbridgeable gulf.

- Luke 19:1-10. The story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector whose profession (and his extortionate exploitation of it) would have made him unwelcome in any crowd following Jesus. But in his encounter with Jesus, he comes to personal repentance, demonstrated in both adherence to the standards of the law and an even greater act of generosity. In response, Jesus declares him "a son of Abraham" (v. 9). Unlike the rich man in the parable, this real man has now turned to righteousness and to the place of Abrahamic blessing.
- Acts 3:1-25. The healing of the lame man at the temple, through Peter and John, in the name of Jesus. In his message following this healing, Peter not only connects what the people have just witnessed to the story of Jesus but to Abraham. He does this at the beginning of his word ("The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus" [v. 13]), and then again at the end ("You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" [Acts 3:25-26]).

"The healing of the lame man is a concrete case of God's blessing of all the families of the earth. . . . [It is] a blessing that is potentially available to Peter's audience."²⁵ Yes, these Israelite spectators were nationally children and heirs of Abraham. Yet the only way for them to enter into the blessing of Abraham is the same way as for all—including the Gentiles—repentance and faith in the name of Jesus. So, in his even longer defense the following day, Peter draws the conclusion that is as universal as it is uncompromising, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

²⁵Ibid., pp. 25-26.

Finally, Luke ends his Gospel on the same universal note as Matthew ended his, but with even more explicit reference back to the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

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

This text provides the hermeneutical compass for the way disciples of Jesus must read the Old Testament Scriptures, that is, both messianically and missiologically. But in the light of all we have now surveyed of the great theme of universality drawn from the Abrahamic tradition, and in the light of Luke's own manifest interest in Abraham, we can undoubtedly feel the pulse of that promise in these great phrases. For how else will the blessing of Abraham come to all nations than by the message of repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen?

Paul. We began chapter six observing the challenge that Paul's understanding of the universal availability of the gospel posed to his fellow Jews. We have now surveyed in this chapter some of the Scriptures on which doubtless Paul himself meditated deeply as he forged his missionary theology and practice. Let's now sample some of the places where Paul articulates the universality of God's mission in terms that recall Abraham, explicitly or simply as part of his "narrative thought world, which was so totally founded on the story of God and Israel in the Old Testament."²⁶

Romans 1:5. "Through him [Jesus Christ our Lord] and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."

Repeated at the end of the letter to Rome (Rom 16:26), this is one of Paul's defining statements of his apostolic mission. Having already claimed (as he also does in chap. 16) that his gospel was promised through the Scriptures, it is not surprising that the Abrahamic echoes are strong here. First, the phrase "all the Gentiles" is the same phrase (lit. "all the nations," *panta ta ethnē*) that Paul uses in his quotation of Genesis 12:3 in Galatians 3:8. Second, "the obedience of faith" is exactly what Abraham demonstrated in response to God's command and promise. Faith and obedience are the two words that are most definitive of Abraham's walk with God.

²⁶The phrase "narrative thought world" is borrowed from the title of Ben Witherington's excellent book that fully supports the kind of narrative missiology of both Testaments that I seek to develop in this work, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

So Paul sees Abraham not only (as all Jews did) as the model for what should have been *Israel's* covenantal response to God but also as the model for *all the nations* who would be blessed through him. We can summarize this double message thus: The good news of Jesus is the means by which the nations will be blessed through Paul's missionary apostleship; the faith and obedience of the nations will be the means by which they will enter into that blessing, or indeed in Abrahamic terms, "bless themselves."

Romans 3:29—4:25. Abraham is the central figure in Paul's argument in this section of his letter. Paul's point is to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles stand on equal footing before God in their access to God's saving righteousness (just as they stand on an equal footing as sinners in chapters 1-2). The dimensions of universality in this passage stem both from the fact that there is only one God, so therefore he must be God of Gentiles as well as of Jews (Rom 3:29-30), and from the designation of Abraham as "father of many nations." He thus becomes "father of all who believe," as he had done prior to his circumcision (Rom 4:11), and "father of us all" (Rom 4:16).

Romans 10:12-13. "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.'"²⁷

If there is only one God, as Paul has affirmed with all his Jewish monotheistic conviction, then there is only one Lord also. The word *Lord* here, of course does double duty, since on the one hand it clearly reflects the LORD, that is, YHWH of Old Testament Israel's covenant. And the text quoted from Joel certainly meant YHWH. But a few verses earlier Paul has said, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' . . ." (Rom 10:9), so undoubtedly he is attributing to Jesus here the same universal Lordship as that exercised by YHWH. And by virtue of that, Jesus dispenses what God had promised to Abraham (rich blessing for all), and Jesus saves all who call on his name. The universal "all" and "everyone" to whom the Abrahamic promise now applies draws its validity from the universal Lordship of Christ.

Galatians 3:26-29. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

It is clear from the whole body of Paul's writing that he preached and taught

²⁷I have postponed further reflection on the major chapters Romans 9—11 until chapter fifteen, on the nations in the New Testament.

a message with universal claims: one universal God, one universal Savior, one universal climax to history for the entire creation. Yet it is equally clear that this never evaporated into an abstract or philosophical universality. It was always rooted in the story of Israel and especially in the promise to Abraham. So in the case of the Galatians, it is interesting to see Paul correcting a misunderstanding of the universal Gospel he had been preaching.

Paul had told them that faith in Jesus Christ alone was the universal criterion for acceptance into the people of the one living God. His opponents had misled the Galatians into thinking that that was not enough. They needed to belong to the covenant people of Abraham as well, and the only way to do that was through circumcision and keeping the law of Moses. Paul's answer is emphatically *not to deny* that they need to belong to Abraham but to *assure* them that they already do! The universality of the Abrahamic promise is already theirs if they are in Christ. And for that reason all the old barriers and distinguishing marks of race, social status or gender are no longer valid or relevant. This is truly biblical universality; that is, it is founded on the great story the Bible tells from Abraham to Christ.²⁸

There is clear evidence that while [Paul's] gospel could be expressed in universal terms [—Christ a universal savior who died and rose for all—], this universal message was proclaimed and received within an explicitly Israel-centred framework. The evidence suggests further that Paul led his converts to believe that by receiving this message they were being incorporated into the community to whom the scriptures were addressed, that is, "Israel."²⁹

Revelation. The only way to end such a biblical survey is in the final book of the Bible itself. Revelation 4—7 is a comprehensive single vision—a neck-stretching, mind-boggling vision—in which John “sees” the whole universe from the vantage point of God's throne at its center. The meaning of the history of the world is symbolized in a scroll in God's right hand, which none is found worthy to open, except Christ, pictured as the Lamb who was slain. In other words, the cross of Christ is the key to the unfolding purpose of history; or, in terms of our argument here, the unfolding mission of God. Why is Christ worthy to govern history? Because he was slain. And what difference has that made? The song of the living creatures and twenty-four elders explain it for John, and for us.

²⁸Cf. N. T. Wright, “Gospel and Theology in Galatians,” in *Gospel in Paul*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic, 1994).

²⁹Terence L. Donaldson, “‘The Gospel That I Proclaim Among the Gentiles’ (Gal. 2.2): Universalistic or Israel-Centred?” in *Gospel in Paul*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 190.

You are worthy to take the scroll
 and to open its seals,
 because you were slain,
 and with your blood you purchased men for God
 from every tribe and language and people and nation.
 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
 and they will reign on the earth. (Rev 5:9-10)

This song gives three reasons why *the cross is the key to history*.

- First, it is *redemptive*. People who were lost, defeated, or enslaved in sin have been “purchased” for God. Humanity will not go down the drainpipe of history into the abyss.
- Second, it is *universal*. Those who have been so redeemed will come from “every tribe and language and people and nation.”
- Third, it is *victorious*. The Lamb wins! He and his redeemed people will reign on the earth.

The echoes of Old Testament Scripture are clear. The universality of the Abrahamic promise is captured in the list of tribe, language, people and nation. And the specific calling on Israel in Exodus 19:5-6, to be God’s kingdom of priests in the midst of all the nations of the whole earth, has now itself been internationalized and projected into an eternal future of serving God (as priests) and reigning on earth (as kings). The rightful place of redeemed humanity is that they are restored to their original status and role within creation: under God and over creation, serving and ruling. This is the wonderful combination of priesthood and kingship that redeemed humanity will exercise in the redeemed creation.

The climax of this vision, with the sixth seal, brings together the 144,000 crowd, representative of the historic twelve tribes of Israel, with the immediately following panorama of that innumerable multinational host of the redeemed, the final fulfillment of what God promised Abraham:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
 who sits on the throne,
 and to the Lamb.” (Rev 7:9-10)

If, when God first called Abraham and designated him and his barren wife in their old age to be the fountainhead of his whole mission to rescue creation

and humanity from the woes of Genesis 3—11, we imagined the sharp intake of breath among the astonished heavenly hosts, then in John's vision we are not left merely to our own imagination. For he goes on to tell us:

All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!" (Rev 7:11-12)

And God, in the midst of the resounding praises, will turn to Abraham and say, "There you are. I kept my promise. Mission accomplished."

All the nations in all the Scriptures. Beyond doubt, then, there was a universal purpose in God's election of Abraham, and therefore also a universal dimension to the very existence of Israel. Israel as a people was called into existence because of God's mission to bless the nations and restore his creation.

Thus, the sense of election to which the texts of the Old Testament bear witness is joined with a universalism potentially capable of embracing all that is human. The God of the historical election of Israel is also the God of cosmic benedictions. The people of Israel, who know themselves to be chosen of God, also see themselves placed amidst nations and a world that are submitted to the governance of that same God. . . . Election does not cut Israel off from the nations. It situates that people in relationship with them.³⁰

The sheer breadth of texts surveyed shows that this was not just an afterthought or even just an evolving historical consciousness. It is a mistake, in my view, to speak of the universal dimension in the Old Testament as a late-developing awareness that emerged out of centuries of more narrowminded nationalism.³¹ On the contrary, it is found in texts of different historical eras and various canonical genres.

Still less is this universal perspective merely a New Testament imposition on the Old Testament that provides *ex post facto* justification for the innovating early church's missionary outreach. Rather, it is exactly the other way round. It

³⁰Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), p. 14.

³¹Such an evolutionary view is common in critical scholarship, but it occasionally surfaces elsewhere within a different framework of assumptions, as, e.g., David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Billy Graham Center, 1994), p. 75.

was their awakening to the powerful universalizing thrust of their own Scriptures, in the light of Jesus the Messiah and under the effect of his own teaching, that propelled his first followers (and generations since) in that direction. It was Old Testament universality that drove the New Testament's concept and practice of mission.

The Bible as a whole presents the universal God with a universal mission

- announced to Abraham
- accomplished in anticipation by Christ
- to be completed in the new creation.

Whatever mission God calls us to must be a participation in this.

Particularity—"Through You And Your Seed"

We must now turn to the other side of God's declaration of blessing. We have explored its universal implications and traced their trajectory through the rest of the Bible. But God did not merely say to Abraham, after promising to bless him and his descendants, "Oh, and by the way, just to encourage you, I am going to bless all the other nations as well." No, the text expresses God's plan for the nations with considerable care and precision. It does not put it in the form of an independent repetition of the active verb "I will bless [the nations]" in the same absolute sense in which God says to Abraham himself, "and I will bless you." Nor does it use a simple unconnected passive verb: "the nations will [also] be blessed." Rather, it puts the more subtle, self-involving forms of the verb (niph'al and hithpa'el) alongside a crucial personal pronoun—*bēkā*, "through you," with the added phrase, in some of the texts, "and through your seed." The nations will not be blessed without some form of self-involvement in the process (the forms of the verb). And they will not be blessed without reference to what God now promises and plans for Abraham (the accompanying pronoun).

Thus, whatever God planned to do for the nations *universally* is connected in some way with Abraham and his descendants. And whatever God planned to do for Abraham in *particular* is bound up with his ultimate goal for all nations. This is the intriguing balance and tension between the universality and particularity of the "bottom line" of God's word to Abraham.

"Through you": The particular means of God's blessing. What is the meaning of the Hebrew preposition *bē* in "through you"? In its normal usage it is most frequently translated by "in" or "through." What does it mean in connection with Abraham here?

It cannot mean that Abraham will be the *agent* of blessing—that is, the one who does the blessing—for that is clearly only God, the source of all blessing. It is of course possible for one person to bless others (by invoking *God's* blessing on them) and in that sense for the others to be “blessed by him” (as, e.g., Pharaoh was blessed by Jacob, or Abraham by Melchizedek), but it is not conceivable that our text envisioned Abraham in person blessing all the peoples on earth even in that secondary sense. So the translation “all peoples on earth will be blessed *by* you” would not be correct here.

Nor is it *comparative*, “like Abraham,” as if God promises that other peoples will be blessed in the same way as Abraham, but not necessarily in connection with him. Nor is it simply *associative*, “along with Abraham.” This would be closer, but it is still not quite what the word implies. Hebrew has prepositions that mean “like” (*kē*) and “with” (*im*), but neither is used here.

The most probable nuance is that it is *instrumental*—“through you.” God's blessing of all peoples on earth will come about *through* Abraham and his offspring. They will neither be the *agent by whom* nor the *source from which* blessing will come, but they will be the *means through which* God (the true agent and source) will extend his blessing to the universal scope of his promise.

The preposition could also bear the meaning “in you.” In this case, the promise could have the more metaphorical sense that all peoples would ultimately come to experience blessing through *incorporation* into Abraham and his seed. This certainly fits with the way some of the later texts we have considered looked to the future and saw the nations eventually being included within Israel as God's blessed people. That is an important theological and eschatological truth in both Testaments. However, it seems more straightforward to me, at least in the initial exegesis of the text as it stands in Genesis, to read it in a broadly instrumental sense. God chooses not only to make Abraham and his offspring the *object* of his blessing but also to make them the *instrument* of his blessing to the world. This particular person, family and nation who are to be blessed by God will be the means of others coming into the same blessing.

Another clue to this interpretation is found in the discrimination that God declares he will exercise in relation to how people respond to Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12:3). People (plural) will be blessed through choosing to bless Abraham. That is, there will be positive hope for those who recognize the God of Abraham and acknowledge with thankful blessing what God has done through him and his descendants, including of course, through the One whom Paul sees individually as *the* Seed of Abraham, Jesus the Christ. Conversely, the way for someone (singular) to remain outside the sphere of God's blessing and

within the realm of the curse that God has already pronounced on the earth and its inhabitants is by refusing to recognize what God has done in the story that leads from Abraham to Christ, by treating the whole thing with contempt and rejection. Either way, Abraham (and all he represents in the whole biblical narrative of salvation) becomes the criterion of blessing or curse, the pivot on which turns the destiny of individuals and peoples.

This double clause in Genesis 12:3a makes it clear that the concluding reference to “all kinship groups/all nations” (3b) does not imply that *every individual human being* will ultimately be blessed through Abraham. It is not that kind of universalism that this text expresses. Rather, it encourages us in the sure hope that the saving mission of God extends to his whole world, to all peoples, to all ethnic groups. God’s blessing will encompass all kinds and conditions of people from all over the world, as Revelation 7:9 envisions.

So we find in these six pregnant Hebrew words of Genesis 12:3b *a universal ultimate goal* (all peoples on earth will find blessing) to be accomplished through *a particular historical means* (“through you,” and later, “and your seed”). Each of these poles is inseparable from the other, and both must be held together as utterly essential to a biblical theology of mission.

The uniqueness of Israel’s election. We surveyed above the *trajectory of universality* that soars through the biblical canon in a great parabola launched by God’s promise to Abraham, landing finally among the redeemed humanity in a redeemed creation in Revelation. A less prominent *trajectory of particularity* can be discerned as well, from the same launch pad. Israel, the people of Abraham, was conscious of a unique role and status among the nations given to them by God in his act of choosing and calling Abraham. Certain things were true of them that were not true of other peoples. God did certain things in relation to them that he did not do to others. Much was demanded of them that was not, in quite the same way, demanded of others. Great was their privilege. Greater still their responsibility.

The number of texts we can assemble along this trajectory is fewer than along the trajectory of universality. This is not because Israel’s awareness of their uniquely elect status was any less than their awareness of God’s ultimate purpose for the nations. On the contrary, the balance of awareness was undoubtedly the other way round. Israel was no different from the rest the human race in being more inclined to think about themselves than about others, even when thinking about the purposes of God. Israel’s self-understanding as a people uniquely chosen by the God YHWH for himself was part of the very core of Israel’s world view and national identity. To assemble texts expressing that conviction alone would generate a very large portfolio indeed, into which some

whole books, such as Deuteronomy, would need to be inserted.³²

My point here, however, is not merely with Israel's sense of unique election alone but with *those texts where this distinctive conception of themselves is related in some way (directly or by implication in the context) to the universal purpose of God for the nations or God's universal sovereignty over creation*. That is to say, I am concerned to see the missional dimension of Israel's particular election, corresponding to the missional dimension of God's world-embracing promise to Abraham.

Exodus 19:5-6.

Now then, if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant,
 you will be for me a special personal possession
 among all the peoples;
 for indeed to me belongs the whole earth
 but you, you will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.
 (author's translation)³³

We have already noted this text in the section on universality (see p. 224-25) The background scenery of the text is YHWH's universal rule over "all nations" and "the whole earth," but the foreground action is certainly YHWH's particular intentions for Israel. It is the latter that focuses our attention here (and we will return to the text yet again when we consider the ethical dimensions of biblical mission in chap. 11). "Exodus 19:3-6 is a crucial speech for introducing the central chapters of the Pentateuch; it presents the rest of the Pentateuch from a new perspective, namely *the unique identity of the people of God*." ³⁴

Laying out the text as I have shows precisely the balance between universality and particularity that I am seeking to elucidate in this chapter. After the initial conditional clause (the first line), there is a chiasmic structure of four phrases, in which the two central lines portray God's universal ownership of the world and its nations, while the two outer lines express his particular role for Israel. This structure also makes clear that the double phrase "priestly king-

³²Peter Machinist assembles a list of "433 distinctiveness passages in the Hebrew Bible" and classifies their thematic variety. He links this aspect of Israel's self-identity more to the sociological needs of their historical origins in marginality as a "recent" arrival on the international scene than to the theological significance of these beliefs. There is room for both perspectives on the material. Peter Machinist, "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.

³³My translation; cf. Wells, *God's Holy People*, p. 44.

³⁴Wells, *God's Holy People*, pp. 33-34, emphasis added.

dom and holy nation” stands in apposition to “personal possession.” In other words, the final line defines more fully what the single metaphorical word *sĕgullâ* is meant to imply.

Sĕgullâ, translated by the NIV as “treasured possession,” is a word that comes from royal contexts. It was used (in Hebrew and Akkadian) to describe the personal treasure of the monarch and his family (cf. 1 Chron 29:3; Eccles 2:8). The whole country and people might be thought of as the wider property of a king, but he also had his own personal treasure, in which he took particular delight. This is the metaphor God uses to describe the identity of Israel. YHWH is the God who owns and rules the whole earth and all nations (a remarkable affirmation in itself). But YHWH has chosen to place Israel in a special personal relationship to his worldwide kingship. What that special position entails is then explained in verse 6. They have a role that matches their status. The *status* is to be a special treasured possession. The *role* is to be a priestly and holy community in the midst of the nations.

Inasmuch as a king chooses his personal treasure for himself, this text clearly expresses the concept of Israel’s unique election by YHWH for a special relationship with himself within the worldwide community of nations. This is the case even though the vocabulary of “choosing” is not present here.

Although the specific Hebrew term for election, *bāḥar*, does not occur in this passage (nor anywhere, used of God’s choice of his people, prior to the book of Deuteronomy), subsequent texts which make reference to these words at Sinai do include the term (see, e.g., Deut 7:6; 14:2). Clearly we have the concept if not the term here in Exodus: Israel as “God’s own” is discussed from a universal perspective and the notion of covenant is made explicit (Ex 19:5). Thus the idea of choice is presupposed.³⁵

But this divine choice is presupposed within a framework that emphatically prevents it from being narrow or exclusive. Just as the call of Abraham is explicitly for the benefit of the nations, so the choice of Israel for a special relationship with God is likewise made with the rest of the world clearly in view.

In fact, the emphasis in the word *sĕgullâ* must be on the treasured and personal nature of the relationship rather than on the concept of “possession” by itself. It is not the case that *Israel* alone belongs to God and other nations do *not*, or that Israel was more “possessed” by God than they were. For the text expresses God’s possession of the world (and by implication its nations)³⁶ in ex-

³⁵Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶Cf. the same affirmation made in a very similar grammatical structure in Ps 24:1. If the whole earth belongs to YHWH, then so do all who dwell on it (i.e., all nations).

actly the same terms as God's anticipated possession of Israel.³⁷ All nations belong to God, but Israel will belong to God in a unique way that will, on the one hand, demand covenantal obedience, and, on the other hand, be exercised through a priestly and holy identity and role in the world. What the latter will mean is not defined further here, but some of the texts below do amplify the idea. The important point to note for the moment is the balance between the exalted titles given to *Israel* and the substratum of God's claim on the *whole earth*. "What the reader is given is not a description of Israel in isolation, but in relation to the whole of God's earth."³⁸ Or in other words, *the particularity of Israel here is intended to serve the universality of God's interest in the world. Israel's election serves God's mission*. This is an utterly crucial point to grasp.

The trajectory of this text (Ex 19:3-6) within Scripture is intriguing. There are several very clear echoes within Deuteronomy, which then in turn generate further ones in Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy 7:6. "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."

All of Deuteronomy 7 is concerned with the distinctiveness of Israel from the Canaanites, in order to prevent them going down the road of Canaanite idolatry and corrupt religious and social practice.³⁹ The point of Israel's separation was not *ethnic exclusiveness* (there were all kinds of ways that foreigners could be incorporated into the worshiping community of Israel) but *religious protection*. The same rationale governs another use of the Exodus 19 text in Deuteronomy 14:2—at the head of a chapter dealing with Israel's clean and unclean food regulations. That distinction was meant to symbolize the distinctiveness of Israel from among the nations. As YHWH had made his choice among the nations of the one nation that would be separate—holy to himself, for his own purpose—so of all the animals, Israel must make a distinction that would reflect that more fundamental distinction and be a constant reminder of it in everyday life.

Two further references, however, link the (implicitly) election language of Exodus 19 (especially *sĕgullā* and "a holy people") more significantly to God's longer term mission among the nations.

³⁷Lit. "to me [*li*] you will be a *sĕgullā* among all the peoples; for to me [*li*] is the whole earth."

³⁸Wells, *God's Holy People*, p. 49.

³⁹On the question of the destruction of the Canaanites and their places of worship in Deuteronomy 7, and how that can be fitted into a missiological understanding of Israel's calling to be a blessing to the nations, see, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996), pp. 108-20.

Deuteronomy 26:18-19; Deut 28:9-10.

The LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised. (Deut 26:18-19)

The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. (Deut 28:9-10)

The final section of Deuteronomy 26 is probably one of the most succinct and balanced statements of the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Old Testament. It records two balancing affirmations: by Israel on the one hand (declaring who their God is, and what their will is), and by YHWH on the other (declaring that Israel belongs to him in a uniquely treasured way—clearly echoing Ex 19:6).

God, then, declares the purpose of Israel's election in relation to the rest of the nations. It is that there should be *"praise, fame and honor."* To whom do these belong? On the surface of the text in Deuteronomy 26:19 they are for Israel. But the closely linked Deuteronomy 28:9-10 shows that the nations will not merely show high regard for Israel but will do so because they recognize the God to whom Israel belongs: "all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD." So the reputation of Israel and of YHWH are bound up together. Such is the inescapable nature of the covenant. This is what is at stake in Israel's covenantal obedience (or lack of).

Such also is the necessary implication of election. If YHWH chooses to attach Israel to himself, he chooses in consequence to attach himself to Israel. What the nations think of Israel will translate into what they think of YHWH—a high risk mission strategy. The so-called "scandal of particularity" was scandalous to the Almighty before it was ever a problem for the rest of us. Yet it was a risk, a scandal and a potentially massive embarrassment that God was prepared to endure for the sake of his ultimate mission for the whole of humanity. With that wider purpose in view, "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (i.e., the God of the patriarchs, and by implication, their descendants [Heb 11:16]).

Jeremiah draws on the election-linked language of Deuteronomy to highlight both the ideal purpose of God in choosing to have such a people identified with himself, and to point out the contemporary failure of Israel to live up to their calling.

Jeremiah 13:11; 33:8-9.

"For as a belt is bound round a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me," declares the LORD, "to be my people for my renown and praise and honor. But they have not listened." (Jer 13:11).

I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it. (Jer 33:8-9)

Both of these verses use the same triplet of words "*renown* (or fame; Heb *šēm*, "name"), *praise* and *honor*," as in Deuteronomy 26:19 (Jer 33:9 adds *joy* to the list). But it is clear in both cases that the beneficiary is God himself. Whatever levels of renown, praise and honor may come Israel's way among the nations is actually for YHWH, the God who chose them as his covenant people. The imagery of Jeremiah's acted parable in chapter 13 expresses this well. A bright, new piece of clothing (probably a sash, not just a belt) would be selected, bought and then worn with pride as something that was beautiful in itself. But the point of wearing it was to bring pleasure and praise to the wearer. That was how God regarded Israel. He wanted to "wear them." Election here is expressed under the figure of choosing a piece of clothing to put on. It may indeed be "an honor" for the tie that gets chosen instead of the others, but that is not the point of the exercise. The intention is to enhance the wearer. Similarly, it was doubtless an incredible privilege and honor for Israel to be chosen as YHWH's covenant partner, but that in itself was not the reason for YHWH making the choice. God had a wider agenda, namely, the exaltation of his own name among the nations through what he would ultimately accomplish "dressed with" Israel.

And it is that wider purpose of God that his people, Israel, were frustrating by their disobedience. They had become as corrupt as a new sash that has lain in wet soil for many months—to return to Jeremiah's graphic acted parable. God simply could not wear them anymore. Far from bringing him praise and honor, they brought him disgrace and contempt.⁴⁰ For that reason, if God's purpose for the nations is to proceed, God will have to deal with Israel first. Hence the promises in Jeremiah 33 and the surrounding context. The restoration of the elect is not for their sole benefit but so that the mission of God, for which they had been elect in the first place, can be accomplished among the nations. This

⁴⁰This is what Ezekiel means in Ezek 36 when he says that "Israel profaned [YHWH's holy name] among the nations," i.e., they brought YHWH into disrepute.

is why, in broader canonical terms, the restoration of Israel had to happen before the ingathering of the nations—a sequence that Paul profoundly understood in his own mission theology.

We can see, then, that Exodus 19:4-6 has exercised a strong influence on subsequent thinking about Israel's role and responsibilities. One further observation may be made about the missional significance of this fact before moving on to some final texts on the particularity of Israel's election. It is impossible to observe these connections with Exodus 19:4-6 without calling to mind the additional phrase in the text that Israel was to be God's "priesthood" in the midst of the nations, a term implying a representative, mediatorial role. Israel would bring the knowledge of Yahweh to the nations (just as the priests taught the law of Yahweh to his people) and would ultimately bring the nations into covenant fellowship with Yahweh (just as the priests enabled sinners to find atonement and restored fellowship through the sacrifices). Israel's very existence in the earth was for the sake of the nations, and it had been since God's promise to Abraham. This is a theme to which we need to return.

Deuteronomy 4:32-35; 10:14-15.

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 the fire, as you have, and lived? Has any 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)

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all nations, as it is today. (Deut 10:14-15)

These two texts express the uniqueness of Israel in very clear terms by setting it within the universality of YHWH's power in creation and the rule of history. In the first (Deut 4), Moses challenges Israel to search through all of human history and all of geographical space. The rhetorical questions, of course, expect the answer "No." They are in fact emphatic affirmations that Israel's experience of God has been unique—unique in the double sense that it was without precedent (God had never done anything like it before) and without parallel (God had not done it anywhere else). This text goes on to specify the two events in

Israel's recent history: the Sinai experience of God's revelation, and the exodus experience of God's redemption. Both, says Moses, are unique to Israel.

The second text (Deut 10) specifies the earlier foundation of Israel's uniqueness—the election of the patriarchs. And it sets that event within the even wider arena of God's cosmic ownership and governance of the whole of creation. Just as Exodus 19:5-6 speaks of Israel belonging to YHWH as a unique personal treasure and in the same breath says that the *whole world of nations* belongs to God, so here, Deuteronomy speaks of God's choice of the patriarchs and in the same breath says that the *whole universe of heaven and earth* belongs to God. Whatever else we may say about the election of Israel, it cannot be construed as a narrow and exclusive favoritism that paid no attention to the wider world. In the light of these texts, it can only be considered within that wider context.

So the particularity of Israel's election is set in a universal framework, looking back. But is there any hint that it serves a wider purpose, looking forward, related to God's mission of blessing the nations? Such a connection is present in Deuteronomy 4, through the ethical agenda and demand that is laid on Israel as a result of their election. And since the same ethical challenge is strongly present in Deuteronomy 10, we may feel that the wider relevance is implicit there also. In Deuteronomy 4 the rhetorical questions in verses 32-34 about *the uniqueness of Israel's experience of YHWH's action* on their behalf are balanced earlier in the chapter by another short series of rhetorical questions about *the uniqueness of Israel's possession of YHWH's law*. But significantly this is set in full view of *the nations* as spectators of how Israel responds to God's law.

Observe them [God's laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6-8)

One of the most characteristic features of Deuteronomy is its motivational rhetoric. It gives multiple reasons why Israel should obey God's law and frame their community life according to his standards. Here, in an emphatic position in the opening section of the book, a primary motivation for Israel's obedience is given, namely, the watching nations. Israel has been called to be a special possession of God in the midst of all the peoples. That calling includes the demand of ethical holiness. By fulfilling that demand, Israel becomes a kind of model to the nations, or, to borrow the language of Isaiah, "a light to the nations" (Is 51:4). Thus, when we find the same strong ethical language coursing

through the rhetoric of Deuteronomy 10:12-19, it is likely that this wider significance of Israel's obedience is only just below the surface.⁴¹

One further clue to the wider missional significance of Israel's unique experience of God that flowed from the particularity of their election is in the explicit reason given for it in Deuteronomy 4:35: "You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other."

The great actions of God in the history of Israel were not merely cosmic theater. They constituted an education. Because of what they had experienced, Israel now *knew* the identity of the living God. In a world full of nations that did not yet know YHWH as God, Israel was now in the privileged position of being the nation who did. But with that privilege came huge responsibility. Israel was the steward of the knowledge of God. But God's will to be known to all people is one of the driving forces of biblical mission. Through doing what he had done for Israel, in revelation and redemption, God had initiated that mission by creating one people on earth who enjoyed the inestimable privilege of knowing him. This was something the psalmists could marvel at with thanksgiving (Ps 33:12; 147:19-20). But it was not something God ever intended to be restricted to Israel. *Israel knew God in order that through them all nations would come to know God.* Once again, therefore, we find a strongly missional pulse beating in texts that affirm Israel's election and uniqueness.

Conclusion: Biblical election and mission. Having traced the biblical trajectory of the key texts that speak of the unique particularity of Israel, especially of their election by YHWH, we need to draw the threads together. The concept of divine election has always been, of course, one of the more controversial of all the biblical doctrines. We shudder at the long and sometimes violent history of controversy within the church between advocates of Augustinian Calvinism and Arminianism. Or we feel the force of the accusation that God somehow sullied his saving plans through the selective favoritism shown to the Jews. On the former, it has to be said that much of the debate over the meaning of election, predestination, reprobation and associated concepts has been carried on at a level of systematic abstraction and binary logic that seems oblivious to the way the Old Testament speaks of God's choice of Israel. Between election in the Hebrew Scriptures of Jesus and election in the formulations of theological systems there sometimes seems to be a great gulf fixed. Few and narrow are the bridges from one to the other.

On the latter, the accusation that election is intrinsically partial, unfair and

⁴¹I will give more extended attention to the missiological significance of Old Testament ethics in chap. 11.

incompatible with the alleged love of God for the whole world, there are several considerations that need to be recalled. From the range of texts that we have now considered, the following affirmations can be made about election in the Old Testament.

The election of Israel is set in the context of God's universality. Far from being a doctrine of narrow national exclusivism, it affirms the opposite. YHWH, the God who chose Israel, is the God who owns and rules the whole universe, and whatever purpose he has for Israel is inextricably linked to that universal sovereignty and providence.

The election of Israel does not imply the rejection of other nations. On the contrary, from the very beginning it is portrayed as for their benefit. God did not call Abraham from among the nations to accomplish their rejection but to initiate the process of their redemption.

The election of Israel is not warranted by any special feature of Israel itself. When the people of Israel were tempted to think that they were chosen by God on the grounds of numerical or moral superiority to other nations, Deuteronomy very quickly removed such arrogant illusions.

The election of Israel is founded only on God's inexplicable love. There was no other motive than God's own love, and the promises he made to Israel's forefathers (which included, of course, his promise in relation to the nations). We might paraphrase John 3:16, in a way that John would doubtless accept, "God so loved *the world* that he chose Abraham and called Israel."

The election of Israel is instrumental, not an end in itself. God did not choose Israel that they alone should be saved, as if the purpose of election terminated with them. They were chosen rather as the means by which salvation could be extended to others throughout the earth.⁴²

The election of Israel is part of the logic of God's commitment to history. The salvation that the Bible describes is woven into the fabric of history. God deals with the realities of human life, lived on the earth, in nations and cultures. His decision to choose one nation in history as the means by which he would bring blessing to all nations within history is neither favoritism nor unfairness.

The election of Israel is fundamentally missional, not just soteriological. If we allow our doctrine of election to become merely a secret calculus that deter-

⁴²Craig Broyles makes this point in relation to Psalm 67. "Psalm 67 shows us that election does not mean that God has his favorites but simply that he has a chosen channel of blessing for all. Election has to do not with God's goal for humanity, that his blessing is restricted to some and denied to others. It has to do with his means of extending that blessing to all." Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1999), p. 280.

mines who gets saved and who does not, we have lost touch with its original biblical intention. God's calling and election of Abraham was not merely so that he should be saved and become the spiritual father of those who will finally be among the redeemed in the new creation (the elect, in another sense). It was rather, and more explicitly, that he and his people should be the instrument through whom God would gather that multinational multitude that no man or woman can number. Election is of course, in the light of the whole Bible, election unto salvation. But it is first of all election into mission.

God's Model of Redemption

The Exodus

How big is our gospel? If our gospel is the good news about God's redemption, then the question moves on to, How big is our understanding of redemption? Mission clearly has to do with the redemptive work of God and our participation in making it known and leading people into the experience of it. If, as I am seeking to argue throughout this book, mission is fundamentally God's before it is ours, what is God's idea of redemption? The scope of our mission must reflect the scope of God's mission, which in turn will match the scale of God's redemptive work. Where do we turn in the Bible for our understanding of redemption? Already it will be clear enough that in my view it will simply not do to turn first to the New Testament. If you had asked a devout Israelite in the Old Testament period "Are you redeemed?" the answer would have been a most definite yes. And if you had asked "How do you know?" you would be taken aside to sit down somewhere while your friend recounted a long and exciting story—the story of the exodus.

For indeed it is the exodus that provided the primary model of God's idea of redemption, not just in the Old Testament but even in the New, where it is used as one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ.

"The People You Have Redeemed"

In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling. (Ex 15:13)

Moses and the Israelites are celebrating the great deliverance from the army of Pharaoh at the crossing of the Red Sea. Among the rich poetic imagery used to describe the event and its historic and cosmic significance is this metaphor of *redemption*. In bringing Israel out of Egypt, YHWH has *redeemed* them. A little later in the same song, the same thought is expressed with a different word: “the people you bought” (Ex 15:16). The people thus celebrate in this song the fulfillment of what God had promised to do for them (to their great initial skepticism) while they were still in Egypt. God’s great declaration of intent, given to Moses when he needed some serious encouragement, majors on the same theme: redemption.

Therefore, say to the Israelites: “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.” (Ex 6:6)

With the single exception of Jacob’s blessing in Genesis 48:16,¹ these two references (Ex 6:6; 15:13) are the first occasions that the Bible uses the language of redemption. The Hebrew verb in both cases is *gā’al*. When a person is the subject of this verb (whether God or a human being), he is described as a *gō’el*—a redeemer. The historical event of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is thus being interpreted through the use of a metaphor drawn from the social and economic life of Israel, which we need to understand. The English word “to redeem,” with its Latin roots, suggests a financial transaction in which one “buys back” something that one had previously forfeited, or in which one party pays a price to another in order to obtain freedom for a third party. A *gō’el* in Israel certainly sometimes had to make some financial outlay for the object of his efforts, and indeed the verb in Exodus 15:16 (*qānâ*) can include acquisition by purchase. But there were much wider social dimensions to the role of a *gō’el* in ancient Israel, associated particularly with the demands of kinship.

A *gō’el* was any member within a wider family group upon whom fell the duty of acting to protect the interests of the family or another member in it who was in particular need. The term might be translated “kinsman protector” or “family champion.” Three situations illustrate the scope of the role.

- *Avenging shed blood.* If someone was murdered, a member of the victim’s family took on the responsibility of pursuing the guilty one and bringing him

¹Jacob speaks of “the angel, the one redeeming me from all harm” (author’s translation)—i.e., the one who has stood up for me and defended me against all my enemies and tough circumstances.

or her to justice. This quasi-official role was called the *gō'ēl* in Numbers 35:12 (where the NIV translates "the avenger" or "avenger of blood" in Num 35:19).

- *Redeeming land or slaves.* If a kinsman fell into debt and was forced to sell some land in the hope of staying economically afloat, any better-off kinsman had the responsibility of preempting or redeeming the land in order to keep it in the wider family. If the kinsman fell into such economic destitution that he had no choice but to offer himself or his family into bonded labor for his debts, it was again the duty of a wealthier kinsman to act as *gō'ēl* and rescue them from servitude (these regulations are interwoven through Lev 25).
- *Providing an heir.* If a man died without a son to inherit his name and property, a kinsman was under moral (if not legal) duty to take the dead man's widow and seek to raise an heir for the deceased. The law on this practice in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 does not use the *gā'al* root, but the most likely illustration of the practice in the story of Ruth and Boaz repeatedly does (Ruth 4).

The *gō'ēl*, then, was a near kinsman who acted as protector, defender, avenger or rescuer for other members of the family, especially in situations of threat, loss, poverty, or injustice. Such action would always involve effort, often incurred cost, and sometimes demanded a degree of self-sacrifice. Deuteronomy 25:7-10 recognizes that some men might be reluctant to exercise such duty in relation to a deceased kinsman's wife, even in the face of public shame, while Ruth 4 strongly commends Boaz for his willingness to do so.

So, in portraying YHWH as the one who promises to *gā'al* his people (Ex 6), and as the one who can be praised for having done so (Ex 15), Israel uses a rich and powerful metaphor. Three things are at the heart of the matter:

- family relationship
- powerful intervention
- effective restoration

As Israel's *gō'ēl*, YHWH affirms a bond between himself and Israel that is as close and as committed as any bond of human kinship, and with it YHWH accepts the obligation that comes from taking Israel as his own family. As *gō'ēl*, therefore, YHWH will exert himself to whatever extent is necessary on their behalf for their protection or rescue. The language of YHWH's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" colorfully captures the *gō'ēl* in action. And as *gō'ēl* he will restore Israel to a right and proper situation, freed from the shackles of slavery and oppression.

We have focused here on the single word *gā'al* as the commonest verb used to express the exodus as an act of redemption, but it is far from the only verb in

Israel's rich vocabulary connected with the exodus. Walter Brueggemann lists six dynamic verbs that occur frequently in the narrative and poetic celebrations of it.²

God's Comprehensive Redemption

Here then we have the first and foundational account in which the God of the Bible is presented as Redeemer. What does it tell us? When God decided to act in the world and in human history in a way that could be pictured as a *gō'el* in action, what did he do? If we are to develop a biblical understanding of the meaning of redemption (which is essential to developing a biblical understanding of the meaning of mission), we must start here and explore all that these narratives have to tell us about the situation from which God redeemed Israel, the reasons for which he did so, and the changed reality into which their redemption led them.

Political. The Israelites in Egypt were an immigrant, ethnic minority people. They had originally come to the host country as famine refugees and had been welcomed and given the asylum they sought.³ However, with a change of dynasty had come a change of policy toward them, and Exodus 1:8-10 portrays how vulnerable they were to being made the target of irrational fear, political cunning and unjust discrimination. They had no political freedom or voice within the Egyptian state, even though they had grown in numbers. In fact their numerical growth is cited as one of the major reasons for the Egyptian hostility. This is a story with modern echoes.

In the narrative of the exodus and its longer term outcome, God acted to liberate the Israelites from the political injustice of their situation, and in the course of time to establish them as a nation in their own right. Provisional survival through Egyptian hospitality was one thing. Permanent servitude under Egyptian oppression was quite another. The former served the purpose of God for the seed of Abraham, but only temporarily. The latter frustrated it and was therefore intolerable.

Economic. The Israelites were being exploited as slave labor (Ex 1:11-14).

²They are *yāšā'* (in Hiphil, "to bring out"), *nāšal* ("to deliver" or "to rescue"), *gā'al* ("to redeem"), *yāša'* ("to save"), *pādā* ("to redeem, purchase"), *ālā* (in Hiphil, "to cause to go up, bring up"). "What is important . . . is that Yahweh is the subject of all of these verbs. This cluster of verbs becomes a poignant and elemental way in which Yahweh is characterized in the testimony of Israel. . . . Thus the Exodus grammar saturates the imagination of Israel." Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 174-78.

³A fact which was not forgotten. Even though the predominant memory of Egypt in the Old Testament is of the oppression, one law at least skips over that and recalls the fact that Egypt had given succour to the family of Jacob as aliens in need (Deut 23:7-8).

They did not own the land they lived on (mind you, neither did the Egyptians, ironically because of the actions of Joseph generations earlier, but that's another story). But rather than being able to use that land for their own benefit (for which it had originally been given), their labor is now being syphoned off to the benefit of the host nation for its own economic advantage. Israelite labor is being exploited for Egyptian agriculture and construction projects. An ethnic minority does the dirty and heavy work for the king of Egypt. The modern echoes continue.

Among the explicit promises of God in advance of the exodus was that he would give to the Israelites a land of their own (Ex 6:8). The economic dimension of their liberation is thus built into it, both in historical reality and in the metaphoric use of the *gō'el* institution to describe it. For as we have seen, it was particularly in circumstances of economic threat and loss that the *gō'el* was expected to act in order to restore economic viability to the needy. Rescuing the Israelites from slave labor was the very heart of the exodus redemption.

Social. The rest of Exodus 1 goes on to describe the escalating state violence against the Israelites by a government that piles brutality on stupidity. Failing to subvert the community from within, because of the midwives respect for life and their courageous combination of wit and disobedience, the Pharaoh embarks on state-sponsored genocide—inciting “all his people” to a murderous campaign against Israelite male babies. So the people suffer intolerable violation of fundamental human rights and aggressive interference in their family lives. Israelite families are made to live in constant fear—nine months of fear as every pregnant mother waited for the news that should normally have brought great joy (“it’s a boy!”), but would now bring terror and grief (Ex 2:1-2).

In the ensuing narrative, the plagues strike back with increasing violence at a regime that has sunk to such depravity. The climactic death of Egypt’s own firstborn sons mirrors their destruction of Israel’s (Ex 4:23). The Passover forever reminds Israel of the social and family nature of God’s redemption and the precious delivery out of such demented evil. And when Israel is established as a new kind of society in covenant relationship with YHWH, the sanctity of human life and the preservation of social justice are among the key elements in their social and legal structures.

Spiritual. While the narrator highlights the political, economic and social dimensions of Israel’s plight in Exodus 1—2, once YHWH appears as a character in the drama, we become aware of a further dimension. The Israelites’ slavery to Pharaoh is a massive hindrance to their worship and service of the living God, YHWH.

One way that the story makes this point is a simple play on a single Hebrew

verb and noun. *‘ābad* means to serve—that is to work for another; *‘ābōdā* means service or slavery. Thus the Israelites cried out to God “because of their slavery” (Ex 2:23). But the same words can be used for worship, the service of God. And of course, Israel’s destiny was to serve and worship YHWH. How could they, however, as long as they were chained in slavery to Pharaoh? The point is made most sharply in Exodus 4:22, where Moses is told to tell Pharaoh on behalf of YHWH, “Israel is my firstborn son. . . . Let my son go, so he may worship me [*‘ābad*].” English translations vary between “so he may worship me” and “so he may serve me.” The truth is, YHWH was asking for both, and Pharaoh was preventing both.

The spiritual nature of the conflict is made in two other ways. One is the repeated request by Moses to Pharaoh that Israel should be allowed to make a journey into the wilderness to worship their God YHWH and offer him sacrifices—a request that is repeatedly rejected, then grudgingly granted with conditions, then withdrawn, granted again, only to be regretted, and finally sending Pharaoh’s army to a watery grave in futile pursuit. Whatever our opinion on the truthfulness of Moses and Aaron’s requests and undertakings (and is truth owed to a mass murderer?), the emphasis of the story as the suspense builds up is that YHWH is not merely intent on liberating slaves but on reclaiming worshipers. The stakes are high in the spiritual realm, not just on the floor of political history.

The second indication of the spiritual nature of Israel’s bondage and their redemption, is the presentation of the conflict as a power encounter between the true divine power of YHWH and the usurped divine claims of Pharaoh and “all the gods of Egypt” (Ex 12:12). The sequence of plagues was not just a series of natural phenomena, though of course the natural order was catastrophically affected. All of them were directed at aspects of what Egyptians regarded as divine power—especially the first (the attack on the Nile) and the last but one (darkness, blotting out the sun). The Nile and the sun were among the foremost of all Egypt’s deities. YHWH proves his devastating sovereignty over both.⁴

The exodus demonstrates who is truly God. YHWH stands alone and incomparable. And as a result of his decisive victory over all that opposed him and resisted his will, Israel is to know that YHWH is God and there is no other (Deut 4:35, 39), and to celebrate that “the LORD will reign / for ever and ever (Ex 15:18). The permanent memorial to the exodus is not some stone statue sunk in the sands of Sinai to commemorate the victory of Israel over Egypt. No, it is the song of Moses celebrating the victory of YHWH over the human and divine

⁴Cf. M. Louise Holert, “Extrinsic Evil Powers in the Old Testament” (Master’s thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985), pp. 55-72.

forces of oppression and injustice and proclaiming his universal reign into the unlimited future. Truly, the Lord is enthroned not on pillars of stone but on the praises of Israel (Ps 22:3).

The spiritual dimension of the exodus, then, is that God makes it clear that his purpose in the whole process is that it should lead to the *knowledge, service and worship* of the living God. The implication is that all three of these were difficult if not impossible as long as they were in the depths of bondage to Pharaoh.

The Bible's first account of God in action as Redeemer then is broad and deep and dynamic. As indeed God had said it would be. His word to Moses in advance of the events cover the whole spectrum. Notice how the piled up phrases of Exodus 6:6-8 speak of God's intention to rescue Israel from political and economic slavery (which included the social abuse and injustice), to give them a land of their own to live in, and to bring them into covenant relationship with himself as the God they would truly know to be YHWH. And these words are only in reconfirmation of what God had initially said to Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus 3:7-10.

I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD. (Ex 6:6-8)⁵

In the exodus God responded to *all* the dimensions of Israel's need. God's momentous act of redemption did not merely rescue Israel from political, economic and social oppression and then leave them to their own devices to worship whom they pleased. Nor did God merely offer them spiritual comfort of hope for some brighter future in a home beyond the sky while leaving their historical condition unchanged. No, the exodus effected real change in the people's real historical situation and at the same time called them into a real new relationship with the living God. This was God's total response to Israel's total need. The whole narrative repeatedly reminds us that this was *God's* doing. Moses and Aaron, of course, play their instrumental part, but the people are told to stand back and watch. So here we have the prime, opening, definitive case

⁵Elmer Martens identifies four key commitments in this passage and argues that they are like central wires that are intertwined in the whole cable of Old Testament (and indeed biblical) theology: redemption, covenant, knowledge of God, and land. He uses this quartet of themes as a framework for his account of the faith of Israel. Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 1994).

study of the Redeemer God acting in history out of his own motivation, achieving comprehensive objectives, and pinning his own identity and character to the narrative as a permanent definition of the meaning of his name, YHWH.

God's Motivated Redemption

What was it that motivated God to act thus? The narrative leaves us in no doubt about two primary triggers for God's redeeming initiative: his concern for Israel's suffering, and his consideration of the covenant he had made with their ancestors.

God's knowledge of the oppressed. Exodus 1 has presented the scene of Israel's oppression under a Pharaoh that "did not know about Joseph," that is, Pharaoh acknowledged no sense of duty toward Joseph's family and their descendants. As a result, we are shocked to read of the fearful suffering of the Israelites. In Exodus 2 we read that that particular king died. The change in government brought no change in the state's policy of genocidal oppression, however, and for the first time we read that "the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out" (Ex 2:23).⁶ We are not actually told to whom they cried out. They may have cried out to the new king for relief, but if they did it was obviously in vain. But whoever they thought they were crying to (if anybody), we know who *heard* their cry—the same God who heard the outcry from Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:20-21 (where again we are not told that the outcry was particularly directed to YHWH, but simply that it was YHWH who heard it).⁷

Not only does God *bear*, God also *sees*. And out of hearing and seeing, God *knows* the suffering of the people. These three words are repeated: first the narrator uses them in Exodus 2:24-25, and then God affirms them of himself in Exodus 3:7. "I have indeed [surely] *seen* the affliction of my people in Egypt. I have *heard* their outcry because of their slave-masters, and I *know* their sufferings" (author's translation). The NIV translates *know*, as "concerned about"—which is probably an attempt to strengthen the meaning, but rather weakens it. It is not merely an emotional *concern* that moves God but a profound knowledge, or better, an acknowledgement, of the intolerable circumstances that the Israelites were enduring.

⁶There are strong echoes of this story in the narrative of the division of the kingdom after the death of Solomon. A new king meant an opportunity for relief from the yoke of oppression, and the people cried out for that. Rehoboam's harsh answer led to the split of the kingdom. The textual echoes in 1 Kings 13 seem to portray Rehoboam in the role of Pharaoh and Jeroboam in the role of Moses (though the comparison is sadly short-lived).

⁷The same word is used in both texts: *šē'āqā*—the technical term for the cry of protest or pain out of a situation of injustice, cruelty or violence.

Looking means God now bears the burden of knowledge. That, too, has to be more than merely cognitive. Knowledge, recognition or acknowledgement is a key theme in the story of Israel's deliverance, for integral to this story is Israel and Egypt's coming to acknowledge YHWH. But the background to that is two other acts of acknowledgement. The first is the king's not acknowledging Joseph (Ex 1:8). The second is YHWH's acknowledging Israel and its situation, and specifically Israel's suffering. God is not such a transcendent being as to be exalted above engagement with people. . . . God gets involved with their suffering. Insofar as knowing is more than an intellectual matter, it is more directly a matter of the will than the feelings. Acknowledging the reality of Israel's affliction is a start to taking action to change things.⁸

God's covenant memory. God's covenant memory is mentioned twice—by the narrator and then repeatedly in the mouth of YHWH who identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. “God remembered [*zākar*] his covenant.” The word *zākar* does not mean a sudden recollection after a period of amnesia. It denotes thoughtful consideration of something one has deliberately called to mind with a view to taking action on it. So here, Exodus connects itself to Genesis as God recalls his connection with the ancestors of the people whose cry he hears, whose affliction he sees and whose slavery he knows.

In later stories Moses will deliberately jog YHWH's memory on this point and appeal to the same covenant commitment as he intercedes for Israel in their sin (Ex 32—34). Here we are not told exactly that Israel appealed to God's covenant commitment to their ancestors. But God feels the force of an unspoken appeal. He had “sworn by himself” to the father of this nation. That oath, ritually enacted in Genesis 15 and confirmed with great intensity at the end of Genesis 22, generates divine self-compulsion. God, we might say, subjects himself to himself and puts his own identity and integrity on the line in the action that follows.

And so the reader is made constantly aware that this new story that will portray God in a new role (as *gō'ēl*, redeemer) is in fact the next phase of the story that unfolded in Genesis, the same story that had been launched by God's “great commission” to Abraham and its accompanying words of promise. If there were missional implications to that great Abrahamic tradition, then we can be sure there will be missional implications to this one also.

For this is the same God, and he is still on the same mission.

God's model redemption. The exodus narrative, then, makes it clear that two things in combination motivated divine action in redemption: the sight

⁸John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 302.

and sound of human misery under oppression, and the thought of God's own promise and purpose. There is a kind of push and pull effect motivating God's action. On the one hand, he is pulled down by human cries to investigate and rectify injustice on earth. On the other hand, he is driven forward by his own declared intention to bless the nations and fulfill his covenant to Abraham. Both of these continue to be prominent themes in the way the Old Testament subsequently uses the exodus story as a model for understanding the character and action of God.⁹

In the later history of Israel, of course, the injustice that God was drawn to in judgment was more often injustice *within* Israel than oppression from external enemies. So the exodus is frequently used negatively as a foil to critique Israel's own toleration of injustice within her borders against her own people. In spite of the example of YHWH's action on their behalf, an outpouring of redemptive power that they celebrated every Passover, Israel could allow the same kind of Egyptian exploitation, oppression, slavery and violence to flourish against their own poor people. The prophets poured shame on such scandal (e.g., Jer 2:6; 7:22-26; Hos 11:1; 12:9; Amos 2:10; 3:1; Mic 6:4).

However, when Israel did experience again the oppression of external enemies, or indeed when individual Israelites felt the pain of persecution, unjust accusation, or life-threatening violence, they appealed to the God of exodus to do again what he had done before—to act as *gō'el*. In worship, psalmists appealed to the exodus deliverance as the basis for fresh deliverance, individual or national (e.g., Ps 44; 77; 80). Prophets used the exodus as template for speaking of God's future deliverance for his people, in the same comprehensive terms as the original. That is, it would be a deliverance that would encompass a reign of justice without oppression, the blessings of economic fruitfulness without exploitation, freedom from violence and fear, and perfect obedience to YHWH based on total forgiveness. Indeed the promised new exodus would replace the old as a cause for marveling recollection (e.g., Is 40; 43:14-21; Jer 23:7-8).

All of this widespread use of the exodus tradition and vocabulary is based on the conviction that God (meaning God as Israel knows him to be through his revealed name YHWH) is characteristically and perpetually motivated by the same impulses that triggered the exodus. Indeed, according to the text, God himself insists that he is to be known in this way. What he is about to do in the

⁹The exodus permeates the rest of the Old Testament at many levels. Richard Patterson and Michael Travers, in their survey of this theme, classify the many allusions to the exodus according to its use: as historical witness against Israel; as a source of instruction, warning and admonition; as testimony of praise and prayer; as a source of hope. See "Contours of the Exodus Motif in Jesus' Earthly Ministry," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 25-47.

great redemption of Israel from oppression will forever be linked to the revelation of his personal divine name, YHWH, and will also forever define the flavor of that name. YHWH is the exodus God. YHWH is the God who sees, hears and knows about the suffering of the oppressed. YHWH is the God who hates what he sees and acts decisively to bring down the oppressor and release the oppressed so that both come to *know* him, either in the heat of his judgment or in glad worship and service. YHWH is the faithful God, who calls to mind the things he has promised, the purposes he has declared, the mission to which he is committed. YHWH is the God who will not stand by to watch these great goals snuffed out by the stubborn recalcitrance of genocidal tyrants.

All these affirmations about God, made at the time of the exodus, are repeated elsewhere in universalizing contexts. So although the exodus stands as a unique and unrepeatable event in the history of Old Testament Israel, it also stands as a paradigmatic and highly repeatable model for the way God wishes to act in the world, and ultimately will act for the whole creation. The exodus is a prime lens through which we see the biblical mission of God.

Exodus and Mission

What are we to take from our survey of the exodus narrative and its subsequent use in the rest of the Bible for our theology and practice of mission? We have seen that the exodus must be taken as a whole in all its dimensions. In this great event, as rendered to us through the biblical narrative, God *redeemed* Israel. The Bible tells us so. We have no liberty to extract some part of the whole and define redemption more narrowly or even exclusively in those terms. Exodus 15:13 celebrates the *whole* event under the metaphor of YHWH as Redeemer.

The exodus, of course, was not God's *only* redeeming act or even (in a full biblical perspective) his greatest. But it is the *first* that is described as such in the Bible, and the rest of the Bible clearly takes it as paradigmatic. That is, the exodus models for us the contours of what God himself means by redemption, even if of course it was not yet all he planned to do in his redemptive purpose for humanity and creation.

If then, redemption is biblically defined in the first instance by the exodus, and if God's redeeming purpose is at the heart of God's mission, what does this tell us about mission as we are called to participate in it? The inevitable outcome surely is that *exodus-shaped redemption demands exodus-shaped mission*. And that means that our commitment to mission must demonstrate the same broad totality of concern for human need that God demonstrated in what he did for Israel. And it should also mean that our overall motivation and objective in mis-

sion be consistent with the motivation and purpose of God as declared in the exodus narrative. I have argued from the start of this book that *our* mission must be derived from *God's* mission. And the mission of God is expressed with exceptional clarity and repeated emphasis throughout the whole exodus narrative. The whole story is shaped and driven by God's agenda.

Two interpretative options fall short of a holistic missional hermeneutic of the exodus. One is to concentrate on its spiritual significance and marginalize the political, economic and social dimensions of the narrative. The other is to concentrate so much on its political, economic and social dimensions that the spiritual dimension is lost from sight. My critique in what follows is not meant to take sides by affirming that one is right and the other wrong. For both do have strong biblical support for the positive aspects of what they advocate. My point rather is that either approach, if its one-sided reductionism is driven too far, ends up in an unbalanced, less than fully biblical, missiological position. Both approaches may be accused of putting asunder what God has joined together, when what we need to do is to hold together the integrated totality of the narrative's impact.

Spiritualizing interpretation. The spiritualizing approach pays close attention to the way the New Testament uses the exodus as one model for explaining the significance of the death of Christ for the believer. Those who take this approach are fully right and justified in doing so, for this is clearly part of the New Testament's rich catalog of explanatory models for the cross. Indeed, well before the cross, the exodus is used by all Gospel writers in their portrayal of the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus.¹⁰

The problem is that, having rightly affirmed this spiritual and christocentric interpretation of the exodus in the New Testament, popular preaching of the exodus then tends to dismiss or ignore the historical reality that constituted the original event for Israel, namely, the actual deliverance out of real, earthly, injustice, oppression and violence.

The thought process goes something like this (I remember it well, for it was how I was taught in Sunday school, with that close attention to biblical foundations and connections for which I am very grateful):

¹⁰The use of the exodus (and new exodus) theme in the New Testament is well documented by many scholars, e.g., F. F. Bruce, *This Is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes* (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968); Rikki Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Richard D. Patterson and Michael Travers, "Contours of the Exodus Motif in Jesus' Earthly Ministry," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 25-47. This last is an excellent compact summary of all relevant biblical material and a helpful survey of scholarship on the theme.

- In the exodus, God delivered the Israelites from slavery to Egypt.
- And through the cross of Christ, God delivered us from slavery to sin.

The wonderful spiritual truth of the second line is thus affirmed to be “the real meaning” of the original Old Testament story. The exodus was all about deliverance. But we know what “real” deliverance means, and it is spiritual. We know what we really need to be delivered from: our slavery to sin. We also know the only place real spiritual deliverance can be found: at the cross. *This*, then (the cross), is *that* (the exodus). Within a typological framework of interpretation, the exodus stands as a type of the cross. The exodus was a foreshadowing of the greater redemptive work of God.

The implication for mission follows. If the exodus narrative has anything to contribute to mission, it lies in the imperative to evangelize. For only through evangelism can we bring people deliverance from their slavery to sin, which is their deepest problem and is basically spiritual. This can be linked to the wonderful narrative of Moses’ missionary call; for just as God sent Moses with the good news that God was going to save the Israelites from slavery to Pharaoh, so God sends us with the good news of how people can be saved from sin.

I am not for one moment denying the wonderful truth contained in this line of interpretation. I gladly affirm the typological relationship between key Old Testament events such as the exodus and their New Testament fulfillment in Christ. There is no doubt at all that the New Testament connects the cross with the exodus and the events that preceded it (especially the Passover). I also affirm (and will show that the Old Testament itself does too) that the deepest need of human beings is the sin within themselves, such that all other forms of deliverance are ultimately inadequate if that fundamental need is not decisively addressed. And of course I agree with all my heart that the cross of Christ is God’s only and final solution to the problem of sin at its deepest roots, and that it is our evangelistic responsibility to tell people that good news. All these things I gladly affirm.

My difficulty with this position and its missiological outcome is not in what it *affirms* (for I recognize its valid biblical foundations) but in what it simultaneously *omits*. I am not suggesting that it is *not* biblical but that it is not biblical *enough*. Several reasons may be given for this.

Whose sin? First, the parallel between exodus and cross, at least in the popular form of expressing it, does not quite fit. Being delivered from slavery to our own sin is not quite parallel to the deliverance the Israelites experienced. For the exodus was decidedly not deliverance *from their own sin*. The Old Testament does know what it means to be delivered from the results of God’s wrath

on one's own sin. That is what the return from exile is all about. Nothing could be clearer than that Israel ended up in exile in Babylon because of the anger of God against their persistent wickedness over many generations. And equally the prophets interpret the return from exile not merely as deliverance from Babylon but as the blotting out of the sin that put them there. But there is no hint whatsoever that Israel's suffering in *Egypt* was God's judgment on their sin. The exodus, then, was indeed deliverance from slavery to sin—not Israel's own sin, but *the sin of those who oppressed them*.

The exodus was a climactic victory for YHWH against the *external* powers of injustice, violence and death. In the exodus God brought his people up and out from under the enslaving power to which they were in bondage.

This is not for a moment to imply that the Israelites were not themselves sinners, as much in need of God's mercy and grace as the rest of the human race. The subsequent story of their behavior in the wilderness proved that beyond a doubt. Just as it also proved God's infinite patience and forgiving grace toward their sinful and rebellious ways. The sacrificial system indeed was designed precisely to cope with the reality of sin on the part of the people of God and to provide a means of atoning for it. The point here is that atonement and forgiveness for one's own sin is not what the exodus redemption was about. It was rather a deliverance from an external evil and the suffering and injustice it caused by means of a shattering defeat of the evil power and an irrevocable breaking of its hold over Israel, in all the dimensions—political, economic, social and spiritual.¹¹

When we grasp this, it would seem more appropriate to link the exodus to the cross not so much in terms of release from slavery to our own sin (which of course is gloriously also part of its reality) but in terms of release from slavery to all that oppresses human life and well-being and opposes God. The cross, like the exodus, was the victory of God over his enemies, and through the cross God has rescued us from slavery to them. There is plenty of New Testament support for this reading of the cross as cosmic victory and of our salvation as rescue from bondage. Paul probably makes an exodus allusion as he thanks God the Father “for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). Later he speaks of Christ's triumph on the cross over all powers and authorities (Col 2:15). Hebrews rejoices that the death of Christ is the means by which he has been able to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb 2:15).

¹¹Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (London: Marshall Pickering; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 32.

Which reality? Second, those who press a spiritualized application of the exodus, which airbrushes the *socioeconomic* and political dimensions of the original historical event, are misusing the typological method of relating the Old to the New Testament. They treat the Old Testament merely as “foreshadowing” the New, in such a way that the Old Testament story loses all intrinsic significance in its own right. By a misuse of the “shadows” comparison in Hebrews (Heb 8:5), this is given a twist of Platonic dualism, such that the material and historical realm is deemed inferior and transient, whereas only the spiritual and timeless is considered “really real.” So the historical elements of the exodus story, which are so prominent within the biblical text, are discarded as a material husk once the spiritual kernel has been extracted. So, now we know what the story “really” means (you can be released from slavery to sin by Christ), we can relegate the rest of its content to the zone of dispensable local color.

But this is not the way the Bible itself deals with the organic continuity between Old and New Testament. Undoubtedly of course, there are aspects of Old Testament *religious practice* that we rightly dispense with because of their fulfillment in Christ. But that is not how the *whole narrative of God's action* in Old Testament times is handled. It is not discarded and replaced by Christ. Rather it is absorbed and fulfilled in him. In the New Testament we reach the completion of all that God has accomplished in redemption.

That does not mean a crude contrast in which we say, “Previously God's redemption involved political liberation and social justice; but now we know it really means spiritual forgiveness.” Rather we see the totality of God's redemption in a way that now *includes* all that God has done—from the exodus to the cross. It is not that the New Testament *exchanges* a social message for a spiritual one but that it *extends* the Old Testament teaching to the deepest understanding of and the most radical and final answer to the spiritual dimension of our human predicament, which is already there in embryo in the exodus narrative.

To change the metaphor yet again, the great historical account of God's redemption in the Old Testament is not like a booster rocket that, once the space capsule is launched, drops off and falls away into redundant oblivion. Rather, to adapt Paul's own metaphor, the biblical narrative is like a tree. We now enjoy the spreading branches and abundant fruit in its New Testament fulfillment. But the Old Testament is like the inner rings of the trunk—still there, the evidence of a history long past, but still the supporting structure on which the branches and fruit have grown. The relationship is one of organic continuity, not ruptured discontinuity and abandonment.

What kind of God? Third, a simplistic spiritualized interpretation of the exodus seems to me to presuppose a quite remarkable change in the character and

concerns of God. Now of course, the prophets are not afraid to speak of God changing his plans in response to Israel's (or any nation's) response to him. There is progression and development also in the biblical grand narrative. But this is much more radical than that.

This spiritualizing way of interpreting the Bible, and the missiological implications that go with it, requires us to imagine that for generation after generation, century after century, the God of the Bible was passionately concerned about social issues—political arrogance and abuse, economic exploitation, judicial corruption, the suffering of the poor and oppressed, the evils of brutality and bloodshed. So passionate, indeed, that the laws he gave and the prophets he sent give more space to these matters than any other issue except idolatry, while the psalmists cry out in protest to the God they know cares deeply about such things.

Somewhere, however, between Malachi and Matthew, all that changed. Such matters no longer claim God's attention or spark his anger. Or if they do, it is no longer our business. The root cause of all such things is spiritual sin, and that is now all that God is interested in, and that is all that the cross dealt with. A subtle form of Marcionism underlies this approach. The alleged God of the New Testament is almost unrecognizable as the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel. This alleged God has shed all the passionate priorities of the Mosaic law and has jettisoned all the burdens for justice that he laid on his prophets at such cost to them. The implications for mission are equally dramatic. For if the pressing problems of human society are no longer of concern to God, they have no place in Christian mission—or at most a decidedly secondary one. God's mission is getting souls to heaven, not addressing society on earth. Ours should follow suit. There may be an element of caricature in the way I have sketched this view, but it is not unrepresentative of a certain brand of popular mission rhetoric.

It will be clear that I find such a view of God and of mission to be unbiblical and frankly unbelievable, if one takes the *whole Bible* as the trustworthy revelation of the identity, character and mission of the living God. But to repeat, I do *not* reject or reduce the terribly serious spiritual realities of sin and evil that the New Testament exposes, or the glories of the spiritual dimension of God's redemptive accomplishment in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. I simply deny that these truths of the New Testament *nullify* all that the Old Testament has already revealed about God's comprehensive commitment to every dimension of human life, about his relentless opposition to all that oppresses, spoils and diminishes human well-being, and about his ultimate mission of blessing the nations and redeeming his whole creation. Deriving our own missional mandate from this deep source precludes the kind of spiritualized reduc-

tionism that can read the exodus narrative, discern one vital dimension of its truth and yet bypass the message that cries out from its pages as loudly as the Israelites cried out in their bondage.

Politicizing interpretation. At the other end of the hermeneutical spectrum are those who are drawn to the exodus narrative precisely *because* of its robust affirmation of YHWH's passionate concern for justice, and his execution of that justice on a rogue state that first exploited the weak and then turned against them with murderous ferocity. They see this as the prime meaning of the exodus story: YHWH is the God who hates oppression and acts decisively against it. The political, economic and social dimensions of Israel's plight, and the matching dimensions of God's deliverance, are thus explored to the full and built into a theology, an ethic and a missiology of committed advocacy for the weak and marginalized of the world.

The most well-known protagonists of such a hermeneutic in the modern era, of course, have been the different brands of liberation theology that emerged in Latin America and then spread to other parts of the world.¹² In some (though by no means all) of these, the position is taken that God is at work redemptively wherever there is struggle against injustice and oppression. The biblical God declares himself, through the exodus story, to be on the side of all who are oppressed, so any action to throw off that oppression and to bring liberty and justice is, by its very nature, redemptive, saving—whether or not anybody comes to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, whether or not churches are planted. So we have the opposite of the first error, which was to emphasize the spiritual interpretation of the exodus in the New Testament and overlook its societal dimensions; in this case it is to emphasize the social justice dimension of the exodus while overlooking both its own inbuilt spiritual purpose as well as its explicit New Testament connection to the saving work of Christ. An exclusively political interpretation of the exodus, however, is as biblically deficient as an exclusively spiritual one. As before, my objection is not to the main case that such interpretations build (namely, that the God of the Bible is committed to social justice and so should we be) but rather when the whole exodus tradition is reduced to that dimension alone or severed from its

¹²I say, "in the modern era," in recognition of the fact that both Jews and Christians through the centuries have found in the exodus story powerful dynamics for political, social and economic struggle against the forces of oppression in many previous generations. See, e.g., Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). See also (but with a more subverting perspective on the normal liberationist reading of exodus) J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), chap. 4.

spiritual and evangelistic implications. Again, several points need to be made.

An unfair objection. One major objection that has been made to the use of the exodus by liberation theologies is that it takes an illegitimate hermeneutical step in moving from the fact that God undoubtedly did rescue Israel from political and economic oppression to the assumption that this is what God wants or intends to do for all other people in similar circumstances. Such a move, it is objected, overlooks the uniqueness of Israel in the plan of God and the fact that the narrative itself makes it clear that the exodus was motivated by God's faithfulness to Abraham. We cannot say that all nations stand before God as Israel did in their covenant relationship to YHWH, and we cannot say that God is motivated by his promise to Abraham in relation to any other nation than Israel. So we are not at liberty to extrapolate from what God uniquely did for Israel out of faithfulness to Abraham to what he wishes to do, or what we should endeavor to do, for the oppressed anywhere in the world.

This was the argument put forward by John Stott in his rejection of the way some liberation theologians politicized the whole concept of salvation in a manner that he rightly regarded as a serious confusion of categories. Writing against those in the World Council of Churches who wished to turn the exodus into "the type of liberation which God intends for all the downtrodden," Stott does not deny that "oppression in every form is hateful to God," but points to

the special relationship which God had established between himself and his people Israel [e.g., Amos 3:2]. . . . It was this same special relationship which lay behind the Exodus. God rescued his people from Egypt in fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in anticipation of its renewal at Mount Sinai (Ex. 2:24; 19:4-6). He made no covenant with the Syrians or the Philistines, nor did his providential activity in their national life make them his covenant people.¹³

There is a lot of force in this objection, and it is of course correct to point out the uniqueness of Israel and the emphasis on God's promise to Abraham. I have stressed the same things repeatedly. However it is not the whole truth. For while I agree with John Stott's point, I do not think it goes far enough in recognizing the paradigmatic nature of the exodus, on the basis of the paradigmatic significance of Israel itself for the rest of humanity. Consider two further points.

On the one hand, we must remember that God's promise to Abraham was never intended for Israel's exclusive benefit. It always had that universalizing dynamic of the bottom line. So, there is always something paradigmatic about what God does in and for Israel. Certainly, there is a uniqueness and a particu-

¹³John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), p. 96.

larity about Israel's redemptive history, but it was a uniqueness and particularity that *defined and demonstrated the character of God*—the God who was not the God of Israel only but of *all the earth and of all nations*.

So while we accept the historical fact that God did not deliver all the oppressed in all the empires of the ancient Near East, we cannot deduce that he was ignorant or unconcerned about them or that his anger did not also rest on the perpetrators of injustice elsewhere. Rather, we recognize again the importance of a missiological perspective on this part of the biblical story.

By virtue of being the recipients of Abraham's promise, Israel stands as a model of the way YHWH works in the world as a whole, in deliverance, in obligation, in blessing and in danger. There is something distinctive about YHWH's involvement with Israel, but this distinctiveness does not lie in Israel's being the only people YHWH is involved with. YHWH is ultimately no more concerned for Israel's freedom and blessing than for other people. . . . YHWH's distinctive involvement with Israel lay in what YHWH was set on achieving through this people. It is through this people that God has wanted to bless the world.¹⁴

And on the other hand, the Old Testament itself actually does draw universal conclusions on the basis of exodus about the character of God and his response to all who cry out under oppression. Psalm 33, for example, moves from celebrating the "exodus" character of God (right, true, faithful, lover of righteousness and justice [Ps 33:4-5a]) to the universal claim that "the earth is full of his unfailing love" (v. 5b) and that all human life on the planet is under his gaze (Ps 33:13-15). Psalm 145, similarly, moves from celebrating the mighty acts of God in Israel's history to the affirmation that he has "compassion on all he has made," and especially that he hears the cry of all who cry out to him—which is exodus imagery extended. And most impressive of all, even Egypt itself is scheduled for redemptive blessing when they cry out to the Lord in the remarkable reversal of the plagues portrayed in Isaiah 19.

So it seems legitimate to me to draw the same conclusion that Israelite worshippers seem to have drawn, which is that the loving concern and redemptive action that God had demonstrated in the social arena of Israel's history, while they were unique within the framework of his covenantal relationship with them, were not exceptional and exclusive. Rather they were, in the proper sense, *typical*. That is simply how it is with YHWH God. Such concern and action are definitive of his character.

The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and

¹⁴Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:294-95.

awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19)

This key text binds together the sole sovereignty of the sole God—YHWH—with his generic moral integrity, justice and compassion, and then goes seamlessly on to the ethical and missional implication for those who have experienced this God's exodus love: they are to go and do likewise.

Not far enough. So my objection to the politicized interpretation of the exodus is not that it is hermeneutically wrong to use the exodus as evidence for God's passionate concern for justice and for human rights and dignity in wider society or the international arena (any more than the spiritual interpretation is wrong to use the exodus as a picture of the victory of the cross). The problem is not with what it says but where it stops. An interpretation that limits the relevance of the exodus to the political, social and economic realm, or prioritizes such issues at the expense or even to the exclusion of the spiritual question of whether or not people come to know the one living God and to worship and serve him in covenant commitment and obedience is simply not handling the text as a whole and is therefore seriously distorting it.

The goal of the exodus in the biblical story was clearly *not* confined to political liberation. Indeed, "liberation" (with its modern sense of achieving freedom or independence) is not even the best word to describe the whole narrative. In various texts in Exodus, God or Moses speak of YHWH's intention to "bring out," "rescue," "redeem" or "save" Israel from the Egyptians (e.g., Ex 6:6; 14:13, 30). They do not talk merely of finding freedom in the modern sense of independence or self-determination. Rather, the purpose of the exodus was to bring Israel out of slavery (*ʿābōdā*) to Pharaoh so that they could properly enter the service/worship (*ʿābōdā*) of YHWH. Israel's problem was not just that they were slaves and ought to be free. It was that they were *slaves to the wrong master and needed to be reclaimed and restored to their proper Lord*.

The exodus does not take Israel from serfdom to the freedom of independence but from service of one lord to service of another. . . . Freedom in Scripture is the freedom to serve YHWH. This dynamic suggests another direction in which we might need to reframe the emphases of liberation theology.¹⁵

So to work for political reform, the replacement of tyranny with democratic freedoms, to devise programs of economic uplift and community development,

¹⁵Ibid., p. 323.

to campaign for redistribution of resources, social justice, the restraint of state-sponsored violence or genocide and so forth are all positive things in themselves and Christians who engage in them can assuredly motivate their efforts by reference to the character and will of God as revealed prominently throughout Scripture. But to *confine* oneself to such an agenda without also seeking to lead people to know God through repentance and faith in Christ, to worship and serve him in covenant love, faithfulness and obedience (in other words without effective evangelism and discipling) simply cannot be considered an adequate expression of exodus-shaped redemption and is certainly not holistic, exodus-shaped mission.

Sin and exile. Furthermore, to focus exclusively on the exodus as the biblical foundation for a theology and mission of sociopolitical engagement is unbalanced in that it ignores the rest of the biblical history of Israel. The people who enjoyed the great benefit of YHWH's redeeming intervention, who were delivered from political discrimination, economic exploitation and social violence, went on to allow all these things to poison their own life as a society in the centuries that followed. And the wrath of God's judgment bore in upon rebellious Israel just as severely as it had on the Egyptians—even more so. So the story that began with the exodus ended with the exile. And this is a story that proved, as the prophets and psalmists perceived, that Israel's deepest problem was the same as that which afflicts all the rest of humanity—their own sinful rebellion, their hardness of heart, their blindness to God's acts, their deafness to God's word, their congenital unwillingness to do the one thing he asked—to fear the Lord, walk in his ways, love him, serve him and obey him (Deut 10:12).

And so, from the death and despair of exile, comes the voice that tells Israel that although, yet again, God will indeed intervene in their national history with another exodus (this time out of Babylon), their real need is not just *restoration to Jerusalem* but *restoration to God*. What Israel needed was not just the ending of their exile but also the forgiveness of their sin. Both are contained in the prophets' vocabulary of salvation (e.g., Is 43:25; Jer 31:34; Ezek 36:24–32). Cyrus as God's agent could take care of the first, but only the suffering Servant of the Lord would accomplish the second.¹⁶ So the spiritual dimension of Israel's (and humanity's) need, and the spiritual dimension of God's ultimate redemptive goal, are both recognized within the Old Testament itself. The New

^{16a}One does not want to make a false distinction between the material and the spiritual, but in some sense the man of war can effect the former kind of restoration, but only the suffering servant the latter. A military victor can bring the Jews back to Jerusalem; but their history has exposed the depth of the problem of their sin, and it will take a suffering servant to bring them back to God." John Goldingay, "The Man of War and the Suffering Servant: The Old Testament and the Theology of Liberation," *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976): 104.

Testament did not *add* a spiritual dimension to an otherwise materialistic Old Testament understanding of redemption. It tells the story of how God accomplished that deepest dimension in the climactic work of Christ. Nor is it the *replacement* of the Old by the New, but a recognition of where the Old Testament's insights eventually must lead if the fullness of God's redeeming purpose was to be realized.¹⁷

Integral interpretation. My plea then is that if we are to regard the exodus as the prototype of God's redemption, as the Bible assuredly does in both Testaments, we must apply the wholeness of its message and meaning to our practice of mission. Reducing our missional mandate to either pole of the whole model will result not only in hermeneutical distortion, but worse, in practical damage and deficiency in the fruit of our mission labors. Walter Brueggemann warns us, rightly in my view, against such reductionism in either direction.

There is no doubt that the Old Testament witness concerns real socioeconomic and political circumstances, from which Yahweh is said to liberate Israel. There is also no doubt that the rhetoric of the New Testament permits a "spiritualizing" of Exodus language, so that the liberation of the gospel is more readily understood as liberation from sin, in contrast with concrete socioeconomic-political bondage. It is not necessary here to reiterate the arguments concerning the genuine material forms of rescue presented in the New Testament. It is important to recognize, however, that already in the Old Testament, the witnesses to Yahweh understood that real, concrete, material bondage is authorized and enacted by "the powers of death" that actively resist the intention of Yahweh. Thus we must not argue, in my judgment, that deliverance is material rather than spiritual [*in the Old Testament*] or that salvation is spiritual rather than material [*in the New Testament*]. Rather, either side of such dualism distorts true human bondage and misreads Israel's text. . . . The issue of the Bible, in both Testaments, is not one of either/or but of both/and. It will not do to be reductionist in a materialist direction. Conversely it is simply wrong to refuse the material dimension of slavery and freedom in a safer spiritualizing theology, to which much Christian interpretation is tempted.¹⁸

Social action without evangelism. To think that social action is all there is to mission, while failing to lead people to the knowledge, worship and service of God in Christ, is to condemn those whom we may, in one way or another, "lead

¹⁷"The drift of the New Testament is along the line hinted at by Exodus and developed by Isaiah 40-55. In particular, the motifs of exodus, redemption, and liberation become predominantly spiritual; redemption from sin is the central idea, because man's weakness and wilfulness is his deepest problem, without which his political, social, and economic problems cannot be solved." Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁸Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 180.

out of slavery” to repeat the history of Israel. For the Israelites experienced the political, social and economic effects of God’s redemption, but many of them failed to enter into the spiritual requirements of the God who redeemed them. They would not acknowledge him as alone God. They repeatedly went astray in the worship of other gods. They chose to serve other nations in alliances that were spiritually and politically calamitous. They experienced God as Redeemer—the Old Testament affirms that persistently. But they would not submit to God as King and walk in his ways. So in more ways than one, they perished.

The social, political and economic dimensions of God’s redeeming work were real and vital, and they still remain as pressing priorities for God—as every prophet testified. But they did not constitute the totality of what God intended by a covenant relationship with this people. Without covenant faith, covenant worship and covenant obedience, Israel stood as much under the severity of God’s wrath as any other nation.

Paul and the writer to the Hebrews reflect on this terrible danger when they point out that the generation that experienced the wonders of God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt nevertheless failed to enter into the fullness of God’s salvation because of disobedience and unbelief (1 Cor 10:1-5; Heb 3:16-19).

A change of political or economic or geographical landscape, a change of government, a change of social status may all be beneficial in themselves, but they will be of no eternal benefit unless the spiritual goals of exodus are also met. So to change people’s social or economic status without leading them to saving faith and obedience to God in Christ leads no further than the wilderness or the exile, both places of death.

Evangelism without social action. But on the other hand, to think that spiritual evangelism is all there is to mission, is to leave people vulnerable in other ways that are also mirrored in Israel. “Spiritual evangelism” means that the gospel is presented only as a means of having your own sins forgiven and having assurance of a future with God in heaven—without either the moral challenge of walking with personal integrity in the world of social, economic and political society around us, or the missional challenge of being actively concerned for issues of justice and compassion for others. The result is a kind of privatized pietism, or one that is cosily shared with like-minded believers but has little cutting edge or prophetic relevance in relation to wider society. One can then be a Christian on the way to heaven, and even make a virtue out of paying little attention to the physical, material, familial, societal, and international needs and crises that abound on every side. These latter things can then be all too easily relegated to such a nonpriority status that they drop below the radar of mission recognition altogether.

Israel fell victim to this temptation too. The prophets saw a people whose appetite for worship was insatiable but whose daily lives were a denial of all the moral standards of the God they claimed to worship. There was plenty of charismatic fervor (Amos 5:21-24), plenty of atonement theology in the blood of multiple sacrifices (Is 1:10-12), plenty of assurance of salvation in the recitation of sound-bite claims for the temple (Jer 7:4-11), plenty of religious observance at great festivals and conventions (Is 1:13-15). But beneath their noses and under their feet, the poor were uncared for at best and trampled on at worst. Spiritual religion flourished amidst social rottenness. And God hated it. God longed for somebody to shut down the whole charade (Mal 1:10), and finally he wiped it out of his sight.

Mission that claims the high spiritual ground of preaching only a gospel of personal forgiveness and salvation without the radical challenge of the full biblical demands of God's justice and compassion, without a hunger and thirst for justice, may well expose those who respond to its partial truths to the same dangerous verdict. The epistle of James seems to say as much to those in his own day who had managed to drive an unbiblical wedge between faith and works, the spiritual and the material. If faith without works is dead, mission without social compassion and justice is biblically deficient.

God's Model of Restoration

The Jubilee

Chapter eight on redemption and mission was devoted to thinking about the exodus. And rightly so, since it is such a foundational narrative and dominant influence in the rest of the Bible. It gives initial shape and content to what the Bible means by redemption, and therefore what our mission must take into account. When all is said and done, however, the exodus was a single historical event. And God's concern was that its essential principles should be worked out in Israel's life. There needed to be an ongoing commitment to economic and social justice, freedom from oppression, and due acknowledgement of God through covenant loyalty and worship. For this purpose, the structures, institutions and legislation that we find in Israel's law were given.

God is a realist. It was one thing to rescue people from exploitation and give them a land of their own. It would be another to keep them from exploiting one another. It was one thing to hold before them the ideal that if they lived in obedience to his laws there need be no poor people among them. The reality would be that they would not fully obey and there would always be poor people among them (Deut 15:4, 11). What then could be done to prevent poverty taking hold permanently? How could the relentless downward spiral of misfortune, debt and bondage be broken? These are the questions to which Israel's economic legislation was addressed.

There is in fact a whole raft of such legislation, constituting a systemic address and redress to the factors that lead to impoverishment. They include the duty to lend to the poor. But alongside that duty went several key legislative limits on the power of those who do so: the ban on interest that exploited the needy or the poor, the ban on exorbitant or life-threatening demands for collat-

eral, the sabbatical release of debts and slaves, the provisions for the redemption of mortgaged land and family members who had entered bonded service to pay off debts.¹

But one institution in particular catches our attention, since it embodies so many of these concerns. And it does so on the foundation of some very clear theological affirmations that lie close to the theology of mission I am seeking to articulate in these pages. That institution was the jubilee, described in Leviticus 25. If the exodus was God's idea of *redemption*, the jubilee was God's idea of *restoration*. Both are equally holistic. That is, the jubilee also is concerned for the whole range of a person's social and economic need, but cannot be understood and could not be practiced without attention to the theological and spiritual principles that are intrinsic to it. We embark, then, on a missional reading of this ancient Israelite institution, moving from its earthy economic details through to its ethical, evangelistic and eschatological implications.

Jubilee in Context

The jubilee (*yôbēl*) came at the end of the cycle of seven sabbatical years. Leviticus 25:8-10 specifies it as the fiftieth year, though some scholars believe it may have been actually the forty-ninth, that is, the seventh sabbatical year. And some suggest it was not a full year but either a single day as an event within the fiftieth year or an intercalary month after the forty-ninth year, with the same calendrical effect as our system of leap years. In this year there was to be a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt and a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell it out of economic need sometime during the previous fifty years. Instructions concerning the jubilee and its relation to the procedures of land and slave redemption are found entirely in Leviticus 25. But it is referred to also in Leviticus 26—27. It is an institution that has inspired much curiosity in ancient and modern times, and in recent years it has come to prominence in the writings of those committed to radical Christian social ethics. Our purpose here is to see what it may contribute to a biblical understanding of holistic mission.

The jubilee was in essence an economic institution. It had two main points of concern: the family and the land. It was rooted, therefore, in the *social* structure of Israelite kinship and the *economic* system of land tenure that was based on it. Both of these, however, also had *theological* dimensions in Israel's faith.

¹I have explored Israel's economic system in considerable depth in my *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), chaps. 3, 5.

So we must look briefly at the jubilee from each of these three angles.

The social angle: Israel's kinship system. Israel had a three-tier pattern of kinship, comprising the tribe, the clan, and the household. Gideon's modest reply to his angelic visitor shows us all three: "Look at my clan—it is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh; and I am the least in my father's house" (Judg 6:15, author's translation). The last two smaller units (household and clan) had greater social and economic importance than the tribe in terms of benefits and responsibilities relating to individual Israelites. The father's house was an extended family that could comprise three or four generations living together, along with servants and hired employees. This was a place of authority, even for married adults like Gideon (Judg 6:27; 8:20). It was also the place of security and protection (Judg 6:30-35). The fathers' houses also played an important role in the judicial and even military functions, and was the place where the individual Israelite found identity, education and religious nurture.² *The jubilee was intended primarily for the economic protection of the father's house, or the extended family.*

The economic angle: Israel's system of land tenure. Israel's system of land tenure was based on these kinship units. As Joshua 15—22 makes clear, the territory was allotted to tribes, then "according to their clans," and then within the clans each household had its portion or "heritage." This system had two features that stand in complete contrast to the preceding Canaanite economic structure.

Equitable distribution. In pre-Israelite Canaan the land was owned by kings and their nobles, with the bulk of the population living as tax-paying tenant farmers. In Israel the initial division of the land was explicitly to the clans and households within the tribes, under the general rubric that each should receive land according to size and need. The tribal lists of Numbers 26 (especially note vv. 52-56) and the detailed territorial division of land recorded in Joshua 13—21 are the documentary evidence that the original intention of Israel's land system was that the land should be *distributed throughout the whole kinship system as widely as possible.*

Inalienability. In order to protect this system of kinship distribution, family land was made inalienable. That is, it was not to be bought and sold as a commercial asset but was to remain as far as possible within the extended family,

²For further information on Israel's kinship system, see, Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), chap. 2; and Christopher J. H. Wright, "Family," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:761-69.

or at least within the circle of families in the clan. It was this principle that lay behind Naboth's refusal to sell his patrimony to Ahab (1 Kings 21), and it is most explicit in the economic regulations of Leviticus 25.

The theological angle: God's land, God's people. "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev 25:23). This statement, at the heart of the chapter containing the jubilee, provides the hinge between the social and economic system described above and its theological rationale. It makes two fundamental statements about the land Israel lived on and about the Israelites themselves. These are crucial to understanding the rationale for the jubilee.

God's land. One of the central pillars of the faith of Israel was that the land they inhabited was YHWH's land. It had been his even before Israel entered it (Ex 15:13, 17). This theme of the divine ownership of the land is found often in the prophets and Psalms. Far more often than it is ever called "Israel's land," it is referred to as "YHWH's land." At the same time, although it belonged to YHWH, the land had been promised and then given to Israel in the course of the redemptive history. It was their possession, their inheritance, as Deuteronomy repeatedly describes it.

So the land was in Israel's possession but still under God's ownership. This dual tradition of the land (*divine ownership* and *divine gift*) was associated in some way with every major thread in Israel's theology. The promise of land was an essential part of the patriarchal *election* tradition. The land was the goal of the exodus *redemption* tradition. The maintenance of the *covenant* relationship and the security of life in the land were bound together. Divine *judgment* eventually meant expulsion from the land, until the *restored relationship* was symbolized in the return to the land. The land, then, stood like a fulcrum in the relationship between God and Israel (notice, e.g., its pivotal position in Lev 26:40-45). The land was a monumental, tangible witness both to YHWH's control of history within which the relationship had been established and also to the moral demands on Israel which that relationship entailed.

For the Israelite, living with his family on his allotted share of YHWH's land, the land itself was the proof of his membership of God's people and the focus of his practical response to God's grace. Nothing that concerned the land was free from theological and ethical dimensions—as every harvest reminded him (Deut 26).

God's people. Israel was strangers and sojourners (RSV), aliens and tenants (NIV) with the Lord (Lev 25:23). These terms, (*gērīm wētōšābīm*), normally in Old Testament texts describe a class of people who resided among the Israelites in Canaan, but were not ethnic Israelites. They may have been descendants of the

dispossessed Canaanites, or immigrants. They had no stake in the tenure of the land, but survived by hiring out their services as residential employees (laborers, craftsmen, etc.) for Israelite land-owning households. Provided an Israelite household itself remained economically viable, then its resident alien employees enjoyed both protection and security. But otherwise, their position could be perilous. Hence these resident aliens are frequently mentioned in Israel's law as the objects of particular concern for justice because of their vulnerability.

The point of Leviticus 25:23 is to say that the Israelites were to regard their own status before God as analogous to that of these residential dependents to themselves. Just as the Israelites had resident guests living on with them in the land they (the Israelites) owned, so the Israelites were resident guests living on the land that YHWH actually owned. Thus the Israelites had no ultimate title to the land—it was owned by God. YHWH was the supreme landlord. Israel was his collective tenant. Nevertheless, the Israelites could enjoy secure benefits of the land under YHWH's protection and in dependence on him. So the terms are not (as they might sound in English) a denial of *rights* but rather an affirmation of a *relationship* of protected dependency.

The practical effect of this model for Israel's relationship with God is seen in Leviticus 25:35, 40, 53. If all Israelites share this same status before God, then the impoverished or indebted brother is to be regarded and treated in the same way as God regards and treats all Israel, that is, with compassion, justice and generosity. So the theology of Israel's land and of Israel's status before God combine to affect this very practical area of social economics.

The practical provisions of the Jubilee. In Leviticus 25 the jubilee provisions are interwoven with other provisions for the practice of redemption of land and slaves. The economic mechanism of redemption is a vital piece of background for understanding the full meaning of God's redemption, as the exodus is called. So it is thus doubly interesting to see how the jubilee was supposed to work alongside redemption in Israel's system. Leviticus 25 is a complex chapter, and I cannot do a thorough exegesis here.³ It opens with the law of the sabbatical year on the land (vv. 1-7). This is an expansion of the fallow year law of Exodus 23:10-11, which was also further developed in Deuteronomy 15:1-2 into a year in which debts (or more probably the pledges given for loans) were to be released.

The jubilee is then introduced in Leviticus 25:8-12 as the fiftieth year to follow the seventh sabbatical year. Verse 10 presents the twin concepts that are funda-

³For a detailed exegesis see, Christopher J. H. Wright, "Jubilee, Year Of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:1025-30; and Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, chap. 6.

mental to the whole jubilee institution, namely, *liberty* and *return*. Liberty from the burden of debt and the bondage it may have entailed; return both to the ancestral property if it had been mortgaged to a creditor and to the family, which may have been split up through debt servitude. It was these two components of the jubilee (freedom and restoration, release and return) that entered into the metaphorical and eschatological use of the jubilee in prophetic and later New Testament thought.

The practical details of redemption and jubilee are outlined from Leviticus 25:25 to the end of the chapter. In these verses three descending stages of poverty are presented, each with a required response. The stages are marked off by the introductory phrase "If your brother becomes poor" (Lev 25:25, 35, 39, 47). The sequence is interrupted by parenthetical sections dealing with houses in cities and Levite properties (Lev 25:29-34) and non-Israelite slaves (Lev 25:44-46), which we need not consider, but the overall legal framework is clear.

Stage 1 (Lev 25: 25-28). Initially, having fallen on hard times (for any reason; none is specified) the Israelite land owner sells, or offers to sell, some of his land. To keep it within the family, in line with the inalienability principle, it was first of all the duty of the nearest kinsman (the *gō'ēl*) either to preempt it (if it was still on offer) or to redeem it (if it had been sold). Second, the seller himself retains the right to redeem it for himself if he later recovers the means to do so. *Third, and in any case, the property, whether sold or redeemed by a kinsman, reverts to the original family in the year of jubilee.*

Stage 2 (Lev 25:35-38). If the poorer brother's plight worsens and he still cannot stay solvent, presumably even after several such sales, it then becomes the duty of the kinsman to maintain him as a dependent laborer, by means of interest-free loans.

Stage 3a (Lev 25:39-43). In the event of a total economic collapse, such that the poorer kinsman has no more land left to sell or pledge for loans, he and his whole family sell themselves to (i.e., enter the bonded service of) the wealthier kinsman. The latter, however, is commanded in strong and repeated terms not to treat the debtor Israelite like a slave but rather as a resident employee. *This undesirable state of affairs is to continue only until the next jubilee, that is, not more than one more generation.* Then the debtor or his children (the original debtor may have died but the next generation was to benefit from the jubilee [vv. 41, 54]), were to recover their original patrimony of land and be enabled to make a fresh start.

Stage 3b (Lev 25:47-55). If a man had entered this debt bondage *outside* the clan, then an obligation lay on the whole clan to prevent this loss of a whole family by exercising their duty to redeem him. The whole clan had the duty of

preserving its constituent families and their inherited land. It also had the duty to see that a non-Israelite creditor behaved as an Israelite should toward an Israelite debtor, *and that the jubilee provision was adhered to eventually*.

From this analysis, it can be seen that there were two main differences between the redemption and jubilee provisions: First, *timing*. Redemption (of land or persons) was a duty that could be exercised at any time, locally, as circumstances required, whereas jubilee was intended to be twice a century as a national event. Second, *purpose*. The main aim of redemption was the preservation of the land and persons of the wider *clan*, whereas the main beneficiary of the jubilee was the smaller *household*, or "father's house." The jubilee therefore functioned as a necessary override to the practice of redemption. The regular operation of redemption over a period could result in the whole territory of a clan coming into the hands of a few wealthier families, with the rest of the families in the clan in a kind of debt servitude, living as dependent tenants of the wealthy, that is, precisely the kind of land-tenure system that Israel had overturned. The jubilee was thus a mechanism to prevent this. *The primary purpose of the jubilee was to preserve the socioeconomic fabric of multiple-household land tenure and the comparative equality and independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units. In other words, the jubilee was intended for the survival and welfare of the families in Israel.*

The inevitable question arises, of course, did it ever historically happen? The fact is that there is no historical narrative recording a jubilee happening. But then, there is no historical record of the Day of Atonement, either. Silence in the narratives proves almost nothing. More divisive is the question whether the jubilee was an early law that fell into disuse or a late piece of utopian idealism from the time of the exile. Many critical scholars affirm the latter, but others, especially those with in-depth knowledge of the ancient Near East, point out that such periodical amnesties for debt and restoration of land were known in Mesopotamia for centuries before the establishment of Israel, though nothing on such a regular fifty year cycle has been found.⁴

My own preference is that it makes sense to see the jubilee as a very ancient

⁴For bibliography of earlier works, see Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, pp. 119-27, and Wright, "Jubilee, Year Of." More recent works include Jeffrey A Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee*, JSOT Supplements 155 (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1993); Hans Ucko, ed., *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility: Jewish and Christian Insights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), and Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). A good, recent and balanced survey of all these issues is provided by P. A. Barker, "Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, Jubilee," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. David W. Baker and Desmond T. Alexander (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 695-706.

law that fell into neglect during Israel's history in the land. This neglect happened not so much because the jubilee was economically impossible as because it became irrelevant to the scale of social disruption. The jubilee presupposes a situation where a man, though in severe debt, still technically holds the title to his family's land and could be restored to full ownership of it. But from the time of Solomon on this must have become meaningless for growing numbers of families as they fell victim to the acids of debt, slavery, royal intrusion and confiscation, and total dispossession. Many were uprooted and pushed off their ancestral land altogether. After a few generations they had nothing to be restored to in any practicable sense (cf. Is 5:8; Mic 2:2, 9). This would explain why the jubilee is never appealed to by any of the prophets as an economic proposal (though its ideals are reflected metaphorically).

Jubilee, Ethics and Mission

Elsewhere I have argued for a paradigmatic approach to handling the laws of the Old Testament as Christians in order to discern their ethical implications in the contemporary world.⁵ This means identifying the coherent body of principles on which an Old Testament law or institution is based and which it embodies or instantiates. To do this, it is helpful once more to move around our three angles and consider how Israel's paradigm, in the particular case of the jubilee institution, speaks to Christian ethics and mission.

The economic angle: Access to resources. The jubilee existed to protect a form of land tenure that was based on an equitable and widespread distribution of the land, and to prevent the accumulation of ownership in the hands of a wealthy few. This echoes the wider creation principle that the whole earth is given by God to all humanity, who act as costewards of its resources. There is a parallel between, on the one hand, the affirmation of Leviticus 25:23, regarding *Israel*, that "the land is mine," and on the other hand, the affirmation of Psalm 24:1, regarding *all humanity*, that "the earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, / the world and all who live in it." The moral principles of the jubilee are therefore universalizable on the basis of the moral consistency of God. What God required of Israel in God's land reflects what in principle he desires for humanity on God's earth—namely, broadly equitable distribution of the resources of the earth, especially land, and a curb on the tendency to accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation.

The jubilee thus stands as a critique not only of massive private accumulation

⁵Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, chap. 9.

of land and related wealth but also of large-scale forms of collectivism or nationalization that destroy any meaningful sense of personal or family ownership. It still has a point to make in modern Christian approaches to economics. The jubilee did not, of course, entail a *redistribution* of land, as some popular writings mistakenly suppose. It was not a redistribution but a restoration. It was not a free handout of bread or charity but a restoration to family units of *the opportunity and the resources to provide for themselves* again. In modern application, that calls for some creative thinking as to what forms of opportunity and resources would enable people to do that, and to enjoy the dignity and social involvement that such self-provision entails.⁶ The jubilee then is about restoring to people the capacity to participate in the economic life of the community for their own viability and society's benefit. There is both ethical and missional relevance in that.

The social angle: Family viability. The jubilee embodied practical concern for the family unit. In Israel's case, this meant the extended family, the "father's house," which was a sizeable group of related nuclear families descended in the male line from a living progenitor, including up to three or four generations. This was the smallest unit in Israel's kinship structure, and it was the focus of identity, status, responsibility and security for the individual Israelite. It was this social unit, the extended family, that the jubilee aimed to protect and periodically to restore if necessary.

Notably, the jubilee law pursued this objective, not by merely *moral* means, that is, appealing for greater family cohesion or admonishing parents and children to greater exercise of discipline and obedience respectively. Rather, the jubilee approach was immensely practical and fundamentally *socioeconomic*. It established specific structural mechanisms to regulate the economic effects of debt. Family morality was meaningless if families were being split up and dispossessed by economic forces that rendered them powerless (cf. Neh 5:1-5). The jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintaining or restoring their economic viability.⁷

Debt is a huge cause of social disruption and decay, and tends to breed many

⁶Interesting and creative applications of the jubilee and other aspects of Old Testament economics are found in John Mason, "Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor," *Transformation* 4, no. 2 (1987): 1-14, and Stephen Charles Mott, "The Contribution of the Bible to Economic Thought," *Transformation* 4, nos. 3-4 (1987): 25-34.

⁷A thorough attempt to apply the relevance of the Old Testament patterns regarding the extended family to contemporary Western society is made by Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family: From Biblical Norms to Public Policy in Britain* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1986). See further Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda & Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), chap. 9.

other social ills, including crime, poverty, squalor, and violence. Debt happens, and the Old Testament recognizes that fact. But the jubilee was an attempt to limit its otherwise relentless and endless social consequences by limiting its possible duration. The economic collapse of a family in one generation was not to condemn all future generations to the bondage of perpetual indebtedness. Such principles and objectives are certainly not irrelevant to welfare legislation or indeed any legislation with *socioeconomic* implications.

And indeed, taken to a wider level still, the jubilee speaks volumes to the massive issue of international debt. Not for nothing was the worldwide campaign to see an ending of the intolerable and interminable debts of impoverished nations called Jubilee 2000. And many Christians have instinctively felt a moral imperative to support the campaign, not only out of compassion for the poor but out of a biblically rooted sense of justice and what God requires of us.

Another interesting, creative and in my view convincing, paradigmatic handling of the jubilee institution is suggested by Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz in a chapter titled "The Jubilee: Time Ceilings for the Growth of Money."⁸ He comments on the powerful theology of time that is implied in the sabbatical cycles of Israel, and its contrast with the commercializing of time in modern debt-and-interest-based economies. Time is a quality that belongs to God, for no created being can make time.

We enjoy time, we are carried along in the flow of time, everything is embedded in its time, so the very idea of exploiting the flow of time to take interest on money lent seemed preposterous. It does so no more because the sacredness of time has disappeared, even before the sacredness of the land vanished from the memories of our modern societies. Instead capitalist market economies have been elevated to global importance; they are enshrined with the qualities of omnipotence that border on idolatry. So the question arises: does it make sense to attribute to money qualities that no created thing can ever have, namely eternal growth? Every tree must die, every house must one day crumble, every human being must perish. Why should immaterial goods such as capital—and its counterpart, debts—not also have their time? The capital knows no natural barriers to its growth. There is no jubilee to put an end to its accumulative power. And so there is no jubilee to put an end to debts and slavery. Money that feeds on money, with no productive or social obligation, represents a vast flood that threatens even large national economies and drowns small countries. . . . But at the heart of this deregulation is the undisputed concept of the eternal life of money.⁹

⁸Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, "The Jubilee: Time Ceilings for the Growth of Money," in *Jubilee Challenge*, pp. 104-11. There are some other creative interpretations of the jubilee in the same book.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 109.

The theological angle: A theology for evangelism. The jubilee was based on several central affirmations of Israel's faith, and the importance of these should not be overlooked when assessing its relevance to Christian ethics and mission. As we observed with the exodus, it would be quite wrong to limit the challenge of the jubilee to the *socioeconomic* realm and ignore its inner spiritual and theological motivation. From a holistic missiological point of view, each is as important as the other, for all are fully biblical and all fully reflect the character and will of God. The following points stand out in Leviticus 25.

- Like the rest of the sabbatical provisions, the jubilee proclaimed the *sovereignty of God* over time and nature, and obedience to it would require submission to that sovereignty. That is, you were to keep the jubilee as an act of obedience to God. This Godward dimension of the matter is why the year is deemed holy, "a sabbath to YHWH," and why it was to be observed out of the "fear of YHWH."
- Furthermore, observing the fallow year dimension of the jubilee would also require faith in *God's providence* as the one who could command blessing in the natural order and thereby provide for your basic needs (Lev 25:18-22).
- Additional motivation for the law is provided by repeated appeals to the knowledge of *God's historical act of redemption*, the exodus and all it had meant for Israel. The jubilee was a way of working out the implications within the community of the fact that all Israelites were simply the former slaves of Pharaoh, now the redeemed slaves of YHWH (Lev 25:38, 42-43, 55).
- To this historical dimension was added the cultic and "present" *experience of forgiveness* in the fact that the jubilee was to be proclaimed on the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9). To know *yourself* forgiven by God was to issue immediately in practical remission of the debt and bondage of *others*. Some of the parables of Jesus spring to mind.
- And the inbuilt future hope of the literal jubilee, blended with an *eschatological hope* of God's final restoration of humanity and nature to his original purpose. There is a strong theological pulse beating in this chapter of Leviticus.

To apply the jubilee model, then, requires that people obey the *sovereignty* of God, trust the *providence* of God, know the story of the *redeeming action* of God, experience personally the sacrificial *atonement* provided by God, practice God's *justice* and put their hope in God's *promise* for the future. Now if we summon people to do these things, what are we engaging in? Surely these are the very fundamentals of evangelism.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the jubilee was evangelistic in any con-

temporary sense. What I do mean is that the fundamental theology behind it also lies behind our practice of evangelism. The assumptions are the same. The theological underpinning of the *socioeconomic* legislation of the jubilee is identical to that which undergirds the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is no wonder that the jubilee itself became a picture of the new age of salvation that the New Testament announces. It is an institution that models in a small corner of ancient Israelite economics the essential contours of God's wider mission for the restoration of humanity and creation.

When appropriately set in the light of the rest of the biblical witness, *the wholeness of the jubilee model embraces the wholeness of the church's evangelistic mission, its personal and social ethics and its future hope.*

Jubilee, Future Hope and Jesus

The future orientation of the jubilee serves additionally as a bridge to seeing how it influenced Jesus, and it helps us answer questions as to whether our insistence on a holistic understanding of mission is sustained in the New Testament.

Looking to the future. Even at a purely economic level in ancient Israel, the jubilee was intended to have a built-in future dimension. Anticipation of the jubilee was supposed to affect all present economic values (including the provisional price of land). It also set a temporal limit on unjust social relations—they would not last forever. The jubilee brought hope for change. It was proclaimed with a blast on the trumpet (the *yôbēl*, from which its name derives), an instrument associated with decisive acts of God (cf. Is 27:13; 1 Cor 15:52). However, as time went by, and even when the jubilee probably fell into disuse in practice, its symbolism remained potent.

The jubilee had two major thrusts: *release/liberty*, and *return/restoration* (Lev 25:10). Both of these were easily transferred from the strictly economic provision of the jubilee itself to a wider metaphorical application. That is, these economic terms became terms of hope and longing for the future, and thus entered into prophetic eschatology.

There are allusive echoes of the jubilee particularly in the later chapters of Isaiah. The mission of the Servant of YHWH has strong elements of the restorative plan of God for his people, aimed specifically at the weak and oppressed (Is 42:1-7). Isaiah 58 is an attack on cultic observance without social justice and calls for liberation of the oppressed (Is 58:6), specifically focussing on one's own kinship obligations (Is 58:7). Most clearly of all, Isaiah 61 uses jubilee images to portray the one anointed as the herald of YHWH to "evangelize" the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives (using the word *dêrôr*, which is the explicitly

jubilary word for release), and to announce the year of YHWH's favor (almost certainly an allusion to a jubilee year). The hope of *redemption* and *return* for God's people are combined in the future vision of Isaiah 35 and set alongside the equally dramatic hope of a transformation of nature.

Thus, within the Old Testament itself, the jubilee had already attracted an eschatological imagery alongside its ethical application in the present. That is, the jubilee could be used to portray *God's* final intervention for messianic redemption and restoration, but it could still function to justify ethical challenge for *human* justice to the oppressed in the present.

When we see how the jubilee vision and hope inspired prophetic passages such as Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61, with their beautiful integration of personal, social, physical, economic, political, international and spiritual realms, our own missional and ethical use of the jubilee must preserve a similar balance and integration, preventing us from putting asunder what God will ultimately join together.

Looking to Jesus. How then was the institution of jubilee taken up by Jesus and applied in the New Testament to the age of fulfillment that he inaugurated. How, in other words, did jubilee relate to the wider sense of Old Testament *promise* that Jesus fulfilled? Jesus announced the imminent arrival of the eschatological reign of God. He claimed that his people's hopes for restoration and for messianic reversal were being fulfilled in his own ministry. To explain what he meant, he used imagery from the jubilee circle of ideas (among others, of course).

The "Nazareth manifesto" (Lk 4:16-30) is the clearest programmatic statement of this. It is the closest Jesus comes to a personal mission statement, and it quotes directly from Isaiah 61, which was strongly influenced by jubilee concepts. Most commentators observe this jubilee background to the prophetic text and Jesus' use of it. It certainly builds a holistic dimension into the mission that Jesus sets out for himself by reading this Scripture and claiming to be its embodiment.

Luke will not allow us to interpret this jubilee language as flowery metaphors or spiritual allegories. . . . Jesus fulfilled the Jubilee that he proclaimed. His radical mission was the very mission of God found in the Old Testament proclamation of Jubilee. It is presented in Luke's Gospel as holistic in four aspects:

1. It is both proclaimed and enacted.
2. It is both spiritual and physical.
3. It is both for Israel and the nations
4. It is both present and eschatological.¹⁰

¹⁰Paul Hertig, "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Reversals of Fortunes," *Misology* 26 (1998): 176-77.

Other examples of the influence of the jubilee on Jesus' thinking are suggested by Robert Sloan and Sharon Ringe. Sloan observed that Jesus' use of the word for "release," *aphesis*, carries both the sense of *spiritual* forgiveness of sin and also literal and *financial* remission of actual debts. Thus the original jubilee background of economic release has been preserved in Jesus' challenge concerning ethical response to the kingdom of God. If we are to pray the Lord's prayer, "release for us our debts," we must be willing to release others from theirs. It is not a matter of deciding between a spiritual and a material meaning, for both can be included as appropriate.¹¹

Ringe traces the interweaving of major jubilee images into various parts of the Gospel narratives and the teaching of Jesus. There are echoes of jubilee in the beatitudes (Mt 5:2-12), in Jesus' response to John the Baptist (Mt 11:2-6), in the parable of the banquet (Lk 14:12-24) and in various episodes of forgiveness, and especially teaching on debts (Mt 18:21-35).¹²

The evidence is broad and conforms to the pattern already observed in the Old Testament. At the level of fairly explicit allusion and implicit influence, the jubilee serves both as a *symbol of future hope* and also as an *ethical demand in the present*.

Looking to the Spirit. The book of Acts shows that the early church had a similar combination of future expectation and present ethical response. The jubilee concept of eschatological restoration is found in the otherwise unique idea of "complete restoration." The unusual word for this, *apokatastasis* occurs in Acts 1:6 and Acts 3:21, where it speaks of God's final restoration of Israel and all things. It seems Peter has taken the core of the jubilee hope (restoration) and applied it not just to the restoration of land to farmers but to the restoration of the whole creation through the coming Messiah (2 Pet 3:10-13).

Significantly, however, the early church responded to this future hope not merely by sitting and waiting for it to happen. Rather, they put into practice some of the jubilee ideals at the level of mutual economic help. Luke almost certainly intends us to understand that in doing so they were fulfilling the sabbatical hopes of Deuteronomy 15. Acts 4:34, with its simple statement that "there were no needy persons among them," is virtually a quotation of the

¹¹Robert B. Sloan Jr., *The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubiliary Theology in the Gospel of Luke* (Austin, Tex.: Schola, 1977).

¹²Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). For a concise survey of various interpretations of the way Luke uses Isaiah 61 here, see also Robert Willoughby, "The Concept of Jubilee and Luke 4:18-30," in *Mission and Meaning: Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell*, ed. Anthony Billington, Tony Lane, and Max Turner (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 41-55.

Greek Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 15:4, “there will be no needy person among you.” The new community of Christ, now living in the eschatological era of the Spirit, is making the future hope a present reality in economic terms. Or to put it another way, the church by its internal practice was erecting a signpost to the reality of the future. The new age of life in the Messiah and in the Spirit is described in terms that echo the jubilee and its related sabbatical institutions.¹³ And the effect was a community in mission marked by an integral combination of verbal proclamation (the evangelistic preaching of the apostles) and visible attraction (the social and economic equality of the believers). Not surprisingly, the church grew in numbers, strength, maturity and mission.

The New Testament and Holistic Mission

A question commonly arises at this point. On occasions when I have presented a biblical foundation for a holistic understanding of Christian mission, pointing to the kind of material we have surveyed in this and the previous chapter (the exodus and the scope of biblical redemption; the jubilee and its social, economic and spiritual dimensions), the question is asked, “But how does this fit with the New Testament? Jesus did not lead an exodus of the Jews from oppression under Rome. In fact he didn’t get involved in politics at all. Paul didn’t campaign for the liberation of slaves. Isn’t it the case that mission in the New Testament is primarily, if not exclusively, to be understood as the task of evangelism?”

A response may be made to this objection at three levels: hermeneutical, historical and theological.

Holistic mission flows from applying the whole Bible. It is of course true that we must read the Old Testament in the light of the New (and vice versa also). And it is true that the New Testament, with its great affirmation of the fulfillment in Jesus Christ of all that God promised through the story of Israel, must govern the way we read the Old. Jesus sums up the whole message and point of the Old Testament as leading to himself, the Messiah, and to the mission of his disciples to the world (Lk 24:44-49). And that mission, in the light of his death and resurrection, was the evangelistic task of preaching repentance and forgiveness in Christ’s name to all nations. All this is readily granted and is at the very heart of the whole case I am making in this book.

¹³In addition to my own work, already referred to, a full and helpful account of the way Jesus and the rest of the New Testament related to the rich scriptural traditions of the land is David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, U.K.: Apollos, 1995), pp. 85-112.

However, it is a distorted and surely false hermeneutic to argue that whatever the New Testament tells us about the mission of the followers of Christ *cancels out* what we already know about the mission of God's people from the Old Testament. Of course the New Testament focuses on the new thing that we now have to proclaim to the nations. Only from the New Testament can we proclaim the good news that

- God has sent his Son into the world.
- God has kept his promise to Israel.
- Jesus has died and is risen and is even now reigning as Lord and King.
- In the name of Jesus Christ we can know forgiveness of sins through repentance and faith in his blood shed on the cross.
- Christ will return in glory.
- The kingdom of God will be fully established in the new creation.

All of these great affirmations, and much more, are the content of the good news that could only be made known in the New Testament, through the historical events of the Gospels and the witness of the apostles. And of course it is our mandate, duty and joy to proclaim these things to the world in the evangelistic task entrusted to us.

But where do we find any justification for imagining that by rightly undertaking what the New Testament commands us to do, we are absolved from doing what the Old Testament commands? Why should we imagine that doing evangelism in obedience to the New Testament excludes doing justice in obedience to the Old? Why have we allowed what we call the *Great Commission* to obscure the twin challenge (endorsed by Jesus himself) of the *Great Commandment*?

It is true that we must take into account the radical newness of the era of salvation history inaugurated in the New Testament. We are not Old Testament Israelites living within a theocratic covenant bound by Old Testament law. So, for example, when we take a theme such as the land of Israel we do need to recognize the typological-prophetic hermeneutic by which the New Testament sees the fulfillment of all it signified for Israel as now fulfilled for Christians by being in Christ. The land of Palestine as territory and turf is no longer theologically (or eschatologically) significant in the New Testament. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere in detail,¹⁴ the paradigmatic force of the *socioeconomic* legislation that governed Israel's life in the land still has ethical and missional

¹⁴See my *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.

relevance for Christians—in the church and in society. Just because we no longer live in ancient Israel's society does not mean we have nothing to learn (or to obey) from Israel's social legislation. The divine authority and continuing ethical relevance that Paul asserts for "all Scripture" must apply to the law as much as to any other part of the Bible (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Now there are some things commanded in the Old Testament that we no longer obey, of course, such as the sacrificial system and the clean and unclean regulations. But the reason for this change is clearly given in the New Testament. Jesus has fulfilled all that the sacrificial system pointed to, and in him we have the perfect sacrifice for sin and our perfect high priest (as Hebrews explains in detail). And the distinction between clean and unclean animals and foods was symbolic of the national distinction between Old Testament Israel and the nations, a badge of their holiness. The New Testament tells us that this old distinction is abolished in Christ, in whom there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28). So we no longer need to observe Old Testament food laws, but this is not because we need not obey the Old Testament *per se* but because we recognize the provisional nature of those regulations as signposts to a destiny we have now reached in Christ. The rationale for our nonobservance of these matters is explicit: they were always provisional in relation to the circumstances of Israel before the coming of Christ.

But there is no hint at all that the ubiquitous message of the Old Testament about social and economic justice, about personal and political integrity, about practical compassion for the needy are in any sense provisional or dispensable. On the contrary, so central are these matters to God's revealed requirement on his people (in the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, Wisdom writings and illustrated in so many narratives) that the more ritual regulations are relativized in comparison with them, even within the Old Testament itself.

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

Not only are these central demands contrasted with more ritual requirements that Micah envisions he might carry out, they are also addressed in as universal a way as possible. This is no provisional regulation until God gives his people some other priority that overrides it. This is simply "what is good." This is not just for Israel, but for "you, O man." This is what God requires, period. The same fundamental requirement on the people of God, with the same sense of nonnegotiable, nontransient urgency, can be traced through texts such as Isaiah 1:11-

17; 58:5-9; Jeremiah 7:3-11; Amos 5:11-15, 21-24; Hosea 6:6; Zechariah 7:4-12.

And standing in the same prophetic tradition, Jesus himself tells the Pharisees that while their attention to the detail of the law was admirable, they were neglecting its central and weighty concerns—justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 23:23-24). Jesus endorsed the moral priorities of the Old Testament and thereby the Scripture-based missional priorities of God's people. Doing these things matters vitally to God. Not doing them was enough to land the rich man in Jesus' parable in hell, because he had lived in blatant disregard for the Law and the Prophets, in dereliction of his covenant obligations, and in defiance of the God whose name was so ironically attached to the beggar he had neglected (Lazarus means, "God is helper").

How then can it be suggested that evangelistic proclamation is the only essential mission of the church? It seems impossible to me to justify such reductionism if we intend to sustain any claim to be taking the whole Bible seriously as our authority for mission and as that which defines the content and scope of our mission. Mission belongs to God—the biblical God. The message of mission is to be drawn from the whole of God's biblical revelation. So we cannot simply relegate the powerful message of events such as the exodus or institutions like the jubilee to a bygone era. They are an integral part of the biblical definition of God's idea of redemption and of God's requirement on his redeemed people. We pay no compliments to the New Testament and the new and urgent mandate of evangelistic mission it entrusts to us in the light of Christ by relegating the Old Testament and the foundations for mission that it had already laid and that Jesus emphatically endorsed. Whole Christian mission is built on the whole Christian Bible.

Jesus and the early church did present a radical political challenge.

A second response needs to be directed to the misunderstanding implicit in the question, "How does this Old Testament material fit with the New Testament?" "Jesus did not get involved in politics" is the common assertion, with the implication that neither then should we. So whatever political dimensions we may have discerned in, say, the exodus are all very interesting but no longer anything to do with mission as mandated by Christ. Our concern and our task, like Jesus', must be spiritual and eternal, not earthly and temporal. So runs the argument I have heard so many times in the wake of teaching a biblical holistic understanding of mission. But is it true that Jesus did not get involved in politics? That depends what we mean by *politics*.

Dissolving the sacred-secular assumption. First, we need to get back behind the typically modern dichotomy between politics and religion, the secular-sacred divide. The assumption that Jesus (or any other religious figure of his day) operated in a sacred/spiritual/religious sphere that was quite distinct from

the world of political power and action would simply not have made sense to anybody at that time. The whole of life was lived before God, and God was as much involved in affairs of state as affairs of the heart. In fact, more than that, political realities “on the ground” were themselves intricately bound up with spiritual realities in the heavenly realm. Each touched the other and were like the inside and outside of the same piece of cloth. Political activity (whether Jewish or Roman) was suffused with religious meaning and significance at every level. And religious activity had (sometimes life or death) political implications. The God or gods you worshiped did not inhabit some vacuum-sealed spiritual domain.

If you were a Jew, the God you worshiped was supposed to be King over all the earth. So the political realities of the world that seemed to contradict this fundamental conviction were the focus of intense anguish and longing. So if you had commented to any of Jesus contemporaries, who had just listened to him preaching and teaching about the reign of God, that “Jesus doesn’t get involved in politics, does he?” you would probably have met a blank stare of incomprehension. The question itself presupposes a radical disjunction of a supposed world of spiritual reality from the empirical world of political reality. That dichotomy is the product of the Enlightenment and not part of the worldview of the Bible (nor, I would want to add, ought it to be part of the worldview of biblical mission).

Nonviolent is not nonpolitical. Second, the allegation that Jesus did not get involved in politics may imply that because Jesus did not lead a political revolution against the injustices of Roman rule, including if necessary violent resistance, he therefore had no political agenda. But a radical political stance is not the same thing as violent politics. Indeed in some situations, proposing nonviolence may be the more radical political agenda. So to say (rightly) that Jesus was neither politically violent nor revolutionary (in the contemporary sense) is not at all the same thing as to say that his claims, teaching and actions were “nonpolitical.”

To understand just how radically political Jesus actually was, we only have to ask why he was crucified. Clearly he was seen as such a major threat to the political powers who governed his land (both the Romans and the ruling Jewish establishment) that they saw only one way to deal with the challenge he presented—to remove that challenge by removing him through political execution. The charge against Jesus was manifestly political. He was accused of claiming he would destroy the temple (thereby threatening its monopoly concentration of Jewish power) and claiming to be king of the Jews (thereby threatening Roman power).

It simply will not do at this point to say that the Romans and Jewish leaders

misunderstood Jesus. We should not imagine that, somehow, Jesus actually meant it all only in a spiritual sense, as if he were actually talking only about a religious kingdom that had no connection with (and was no threat to) the “real world” of earthly politics. That’s all Jesus meant, we might say, but they made the ghastly mistake of taking him far too literally. They should not have felt threatened at all because the message of Jesus was only about God and personal faith, about good behavior and loving everybody and going to heaven in the end.

This will not do because it just is not true. If it had been true, the crucifixion would be an unsolved mystery. The Jewish and Roman authorities may well have misunderstood Jesus in many ways, but they were astute political operators and they knew a threat when they saw one. And they were right to. For the claims of Jesus do indeed subvert all human authority and call it to account to the higher court of God’s justice. If God is indeed King, then Caesar is not (in the way the Romans believed him to be). And if Jesus is the messianic King of Israel, then the old order of things in the Jewish establishment, symbolized by the whole temple system, is indeed coming to an end.¹⁵

“*Your kingdom come . . . on earth.*” Third, we need to overcome the common spiritualizing mode in which we think of the kingdom of God. In popular thinking the phrase is either a synonym for heaven—an other-worldly place into which we one day hope to enter, or an entirely inward and spiritual thing connected only with personal piety.¹⁶ Of course it does have a future dimension, and of course it governs personal behavior, but the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus within the framework of his own people’s understanding and expectation was much more than either of these.

Jesus did not invent the term *kingdom of God*. He filled it with fresh significance in relation to himself, but his hearers already knew from their Scriptures about the reign of YHWH. They sang about it most sabbaths in the synagogue from Psalms (like Ps 96—98; 145) that celebrated it. They eagerly anticipated it from the words of prophets who set before the imagination of faith and worship

¹⁵A useful brief summary of the social and political implications of Jesus’ claims and teachings is Stephen Mott, *Jesus and Social Ethics*, Grove Booklets on Ethics (Nottingham, U.K.: Grove Books, 1984), first published as Stephen Mott, “The Use of the New Testament in Social Ethics,” *Transformation* 1, nos. 2-3 (1984). See also Paul Hertig, “The Subversive Kingship of Jesus and Christian Social Witness,” *Missiology* 32 (2004): 475-90.

¹⁶Matthew’s preference for “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God” does not imply any distinction, of course. Almost certainly his use of this phrase is out of deference to Jewish reticence in using the name of God and regularly substituting “heaven.” The term does not indicate a place somewhere else but the dynamic reign of God here and now, and yet to come.

pictures of what it will be like when God comes to reign. Such pictures were far from merely personalized piety or a realm beyond the sky when you die.

The reign of YHWH, when it would finally come, would mean justice for the oppressed and the overthrow of the wicked. It would bring true peace to the nations and the abolition of war, the means of war, and training for war. It would put an end to poverty, want and need, and provide everyone with economic viability (under the metaphor “under his own vine and fig tree”). It would mean satisfying and fulfilling life for human families, safety for children, and fulfillment for the elderly, without danger from enemies, and all of this within a renewed creation free from harm and threat. It would mean the inversion of the moral values that dominate the current world order, for in the kingdom of God the upside down priorities of the beatitudes operate and the Magnificat is not just wishful thinking.

It was one such Scripture that Jesus used to summarize both the meaning of the coming reign of God and his own role within it—in his famous Nazareth Manifesto in Luke 4:14-30, when he read from Isaiah 61, with its combined echo of both exodus and jubilee.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19)

Now if, as Jesus taught, this reign of God was already breaking into human history through his own coming, then even though its complete establishing lay in the future, those who choose to belong to it must live by its standards in the here and now. So followers of Jesus are to be those who “seek first the kingdom of God and his justice” (Mt 6:33, author's translation)—a missional statement if ever there was one, and one that is entirely in line with the burden of argument in this book. For this prioritization of life makes our mission dependent on God's. His is the kingdom and his is the justice. Our mission is to seek both in all we do in our own life and work.

Breaking society's boundary markers. Fourth, the practice of Jesus and the new community he established had more political significance than we often recognize. Jesus was actually more revolutionary than we think. We are aware, of course, that some of what Jesus did was rather shocking to his contemporaries. But this was not just a matter of *social* shock, as if Jesus were merely some-

what embarrassing to conventional good manners. Many outstanding leaders have been embarrassing. It is not a crucifixion thing.

Again, we must remember that Jesus was perceived as a *threat*, and a political threat at that. This was because many of his actions crossed boundaries and broke taboos or cut through established social protocol in a way that subverted the way society was ordered and stratified. And in all societies, political power depends on conventional acceptance of “the way things are and always should be.” In first century Jewish society that included a range of assumptions on many matters, such as

- who was clean and who was unclean (which had pervasive social ramifications)
- whom you could touch and whom you made strenuous efforts to avoid
- who belonged among “the righteous” and who did not
- what you could and could not do on the sabbath
- whom you could eat with and whom you never should
- who could dispense forgiveness and in what context, and who thereby had the power to define the social exclusion or inclusion that went with it

Jesus dissolved some of these, abolished some, ignored others and deliberately challenged a few of them.

He turned the clean-unclean distinction inside out. He chose to heal on the sabbath day and to redefine its significance around himself. He reached out to those who were excluded by the taboos of society: women, children, the sick, the unclean, even the dead. He declared forgiveness to people on his own authority, completely bypassing the normal route for such benefit, namely, the official sacrificial cult at the temple. He ate with tax collectors, prostitutes and “sinners” (by official designation). Furthermore, he told stories that gave the “official” story of Israel a very different ending in its damning effect on those in power in society, and they knew he was talking about them. And as he stood on trial before the highest political-religious authority in all Jewish society, he calmly took to himself the identity of the Danielic Son of Man, whose authority would ultimately overthrow the beasts of oppressive and persecuting powers (Dan 7). No wonder the chief priest tore his robes and cried blasphemy. It just won’t do when the chief priest is cast in the role of chief beast. Jesus’ radical claims and teaching were not just bursting old wineskins; they were enough to burst some political blood vessels.¹⁷

¹⁷Cf. Colin J. D. Greene, *Christology in Cultural Perspective: Marking out the Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), esp. chap. 7, “Christology and Human Liberation.”

The political price of following Jesus. Fifth, the community that Jesus formed, while it was certainly not launched as yet another political party, as a fifth option to the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots, was a community whose loyalty to Christ had unavoidable social and political implications. Jesus himself warned his followers that their discipleship would involve possible social conflict with their own families and neighbors (as his own obedience to his Father had meant for him). And it would very likely lead them to fall foul of the governing authorities, who would persecute, accuse, arrest, charge, and condemn them. Such would be the price of acknowledging Jesus of Nazareth as Christ and Lord.

Within weeks of the crucifixion of Jesus, exactly this took place, as Peter and John were arraigned before the Sanhedrin. And so the New Testament adds its first case of political disobedience to the noble list in the Old Testament that is headed by Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh because they feared the Lord.

And in the wider Roman world the story would be the same. To confess Jesus as Messiah (King) and Lord was effectively to deny that Caesar is Lord. But that latter declaration was the defining creed and political glue of the Roman Empire. Rome did not mind what gods you chose to worship so long as you were willing to give prime allegiance to the gods of Rome, and especially to the emperor. You did that by burning incense before a bust of the emperor in a public place and affirming "*Kyrios Kaisar*," "Caesar is Lord." But Christians declared there is another King, called Jesus, above whom there is no king, for he is King of the universe. So to confess "*Kyrios Iêsous*," "Jesus is Lord," was to make a statement that is as much political as it is religious, for it relativizes all forms of human authority on earth under the sovereignty of God in Christ. And multitudes of Christians perished paying the political price of refusing to confess the lordship of Caesar with the same lips that confessed the sole lordship of Christ.

But the early Christian community was not marked solely by its affirmation of a claim that subverted the political pretension of the empire. It was also a radically prophetic community, for they sought to live out within the present old order of the world the truths and values of the in-breaking new order of the kingdom of God. This new community, consciously shaped by the eschatological outpouring of God's Spirit, chose to express their spiritual unity through as much economic equality as they could achieve, so that none need be poor within their midst. They were taught by apostles, who insisted that a primary duty of Christians was not just to witness and evangelize but to "do good" (as Paul urges seven times in one tiny letter to Titus) and to be models of practical love in a world full of hatred. They were to be good citizens and pay their taxes, but also to recall

that God's mandate to the state authorities (who are "servants of God") was to do justice, punish wickedness and reward goodness (Rom 13:1-7). They accepted that political authorities were there by God's appointment, but they would not have forgotten the words of the prophets, who declared that governments that perverted justice stood under God's ultimate judgment (e.g., Jer 22:1-5). And they were reminded, in true prophetic style, by James not only that faith without practical action of love and justice is dead but also that it was still part of the apostolic duty of the church (as much as the prophetic duty of old) to denounce in no uncertain terms the oppressive practices of unscrupulous employers who feed their obscene luxury on the tears of those they exploit (Jas 2:14-17; 5:1-6). No, the early Christians, with all their unbounded evangelistic energy, were not lacking in awareness of the radical implications of their faith for the political, social and economic world around them. The favorite counterallegation that they did not seek to abolish slavery seems an inadequate basis on which to rest a view that early Christianity had no political or social interest.

The Centrality of the Cross

Any theology of mission that claims to be biblical must have at its core that which is at the very core of biblical faith—the cross of Christ. So if we are to establish that a truly biblical understanding of mission is holistic, integrating all the dimensions we have been surveying hitherto, then we must ask how all of that coheres around the cross.

A mission-centered theology of the cross. I have been arguing throughout this book that the Bible presents to us God's own mission to redeem and renew his whole creation. We have more of that journey still to travel in the chapters to come. However, in the context of this discussion of the meaning of redemption and its relation to mission, a key point must be made at this stage.

God's mission has many dimensions as we trace the theme of his saving purpose through the different strands of Scripture. But every dimension of that mission of God led inexorably to the cross of Christ. *The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's mission.*

Think for a moment of some of the great contours of God's redemptive purpose. The following items (at least) would probably have been included by Paul in what he called "the whole will [or purpose] of God" (Acts 20:27). I list them as minimally as possible. Every point deserves a theological discourse of its own (and has generated many).

It was the purpose or mission of God

- *to deal with the guilt of human sin*, which had to be punished for God's own

justice to be vindicated. And at the cross God accomplished this. God took that guilt and punishment upon himself in loving and willing self-substitution through the person of his own Son. For “the LORD has laid on him / the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6), and Christ “himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24). The cross is the place of personal pardon, forgiveness and justification for guilty sinners.

- *to defeat the powers of evil* and all the forces (angelic, spiritual, “seen or unseen”) that oppress, crush, invade, spoil, and destroy human life, whether directly or by human agency. And at the cross God accomplished this, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15). The cross is the place of defeat for all cosmic evil and seals its ultimate destruction.
- *to destroy death*, the great invader and enemy of human life in God’s world. And at the cross God did so, when “by [Christ’s] death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). The cross, paradoxically the most terrible symbol of death in the ancient world, is the fount of life.
- *to remove the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile*, and by implication ultimately all forms of enmity and alienation. And at the cross God did so, “for he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Eph 2:14-16). The cross is the place of reconciliation, to God and one another.
- *to heal and reconcile his whole creation*, the cosmic mission of God. And at the cross God made this ultimately possible. For it is God’s final will “through [Christ] to reconcile all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20; the “all things” here must clearly mean the whole created cosmos, since that is what Paul says has been created by Christ and for Christ (Col 1:15-16), and has now been reconciled by Christ (Col 1:20). The cross is the guarantee of a healed creation to come.

So then, all these huge dimensions of God’s redemptive mission are set before us in the Bible. God’s mission was that

- sin should be punished and sinners forgiven.
- evil should be defeated and humanity liberated.
- death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to light.

- enemies should be reconciled to one another and to God.
- creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its Creator.

All of these together constitute the mission of God. And all of these led to the cross of Christ. *The cross was the unavoidable cost of God's total mission*—as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: “not my will, but yours, be done.”

A full biblical understanding of the atoning work of Christ on the cross goes far beyond (though of course it includes) the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness. That Jesus died in my place, bearing the guilt of my sin as my voluntary substitute, is the most gloriously liberating truth to which we cling in glad and grateful worship with tears of wonder. That I should long for others to know this truth and be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on the crucified Savior in repentance and faith is the most energizing motive for evangelism. All of this must be maintained with total commitment and personal conviction.

But there is more in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to biblical mission than evangelism. The gospel is good news for the whole creation (to whom, according to the longer ending of Mark, it is to be preached [Mk 16:15; cf. Eph 3:10]). To point out these wider dimensions of God's redemptive mission (and therefore of our committed participation in God's mission) is *not* watering down the gospel of personal salvation (as is sometimes alleged). Rather, we set that most precious personal good news for the individual firmly and affirmatively within its full biblical context of *all* that God has achieved and will finally complete through the cross of Christ.

A cross-centered theology of mission. So the cross was the unavoidable cost of *God's* mission. But it is equally true and biblical to say that *the cross is the unavoidable center of our mission*. All Christian mission flows from the cross—as its source, its power, and as that which defines its scope.

It is vital that we see the cross as central and integral to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission, that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that while our evangelism must be centered on the cross (as of course it has to be), our social engagement and other forms of practical mission work have some other theological foundation or justification.

Why is the cross just as important across the whole field of mission? Because in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Christ we are confronting the powers of evil and the kingdom of Satan—with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ—that is, if we are to proclaim that Jesus is king, in a world that still likes to chant “we have no king but Caesar” and his many suc-

cessors, including mammon—then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one, in all its legion manifestations. The deadly reality of this battle against the powers of evil is the unanimous testimony of those who struggle for justice, for the needs of the poor and oppressed, the sick and the ignorant, and even those who seek to care for and protect God's creation against exploiters and polluters, just as much as it is the experience of those (frequently the same people) who struggle evangelistically to bring people to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord and plant churches. In all such work we confront the reality of sin and Satan. In all such work we are challenging the darkness of the world with the light and good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

By what authority can we do so? With what power are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis dare we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed, in people's spiritual, moral, physical and social lives? Only through the cross.

- Only in the cross is there forgiveness, justification and cleansing for guilty sinners.
- Only in the cross stands the defeat of evil powers.
- Only in the cross is there release from the fear of death and its ultimate destruction altogether.
- Only in the cross are even the most intractable of enemies reconciled.
- Only in the cross will we finally witness the healing of all creation.

The fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin, which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess. And by God's incredible grace we have a gospel big enough to redeem all that sin and evil has touched. And every dimension of that good news is good news utterly and only because of the blood of Christ on the cross.

Ultimately all that will be there in the new, redeemed creation will be there because of the cross. And conversely, all that will not be there (suffering, tears, sin, Satan, sickness, oppression, corruption, decay and death) will not be there because they will have been defeated and destroyed by the cross. That is the length, breadth, height and depth of God's idea of redemption. It is exceedingly good news. It is the font of all our mission.

So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the cross. That includes the conviction that the cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power,

no other resource, no other name through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person and the whole world than Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Practice and Priorities

For the past two chapters we have been considering the biblical case for a holistic understanding of mission. Inevitably, however, a number of questions arise of a more practical nature, which need to be acknowledged in conclusion.

Primacy or ultimacy? Even if we agree that biblical mission is intrinsically holistic and that Christians should be involved in the whole wide range of biblical imperatives—seeking justice, working for the poor and needy, preaching the gospel of Christ, teaching, healing, feeding, educating, and so forth—isn't it still the case that evangelism has primacy in all of this? Evangelism may not be the only thing we should do in mission, but isn't it the most important? Shouldn't it have priority over all else?

There is a strong current of evangelical mission thinking that has argued in this way, and it is not lightly to be challenged, let alone set aside.¹⁸ Advocates of the primacy of evangelism do not deny the holistic nature of biblical mission and the broad scope of all that we should rightly be involved in as we engage in mission for Christ's sake. They see the relationship between evangelism and social action as being totally integral and inseparable—like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird or airplane. You cannot meaningfully have one without the other, even though they are not identical to each other, nor can the one be substituted for the other. But still, even in a relationship of such integration, evangelism is seen as primary, for the reason that *Christian* social action (as part of mission) requires the existence of socially active *Christians*, and that presupposes the evangelism by which they came to faith in Christ. Evangelism thus has a kind of chronological as well as theological primacy.

There is a strong logic here, and such a position is infinitely preferable to either an extreme affirmation of evangelism as the only rightful owner of the

¹⁸The Lausanne Covenant of 1974 and the extraordinarily productive decade of follow-up conferences and statements on the relationship between evangelism and social action provide the mainstream of such thinking. It can be navigated in the very helpful compendium of all the Lausanne documents up to 1989: John Stott, ed. *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974-1989* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996). The thinking in all this material is broadly holistic. Further analysis of the recovery of this understanding of mission can be found in Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity*, Global Christian Library (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), chap. 9; and David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), pp. 400-408.

patent on Christian mission (to the exclusion of all other endeavors from any right to even use the term *mission*) or an extreme liberal and pluralist politicizing of the meaning of mission, such that evangelism is about the only thing you are *not* allowed to do.

However, there are some uncomfortable consequences of such a view when it filters down to the thinking and practice of some individuals, agencies and churches. Consider what follows as a few gentle questions rather than severe critique, since this is a position with which I have considerable sympathy.

First, the language of “priority” implies that all else is “secondary” at best. From the world of sporting clichés, we know that “second is nowhere” (at least that’s how my own former sport of rowing would speak of the annual Cambridge-Oxford Boat Race). And indeed, there are churches and mission agencies that have adopted the term *secondary mission* to describe all those who are not directly involved in evangelism and church planting. I have friends serving as medical missionaries in Africa who received a letter from their supporting church informing them that they had now been reclassified as “secondary missionaries.” The easily detectable subtext of this kind of language (which is sometimes verbalized exactly thus) is that they are not *real* missionaries at all. In other words, the language of priority and primacy quickly tends to imply singularity and exclusion. Evangelism is the *only* real mission. We are back to so exalting the New Testament evangelistic mandate that we think it absolves us from all other dimensions of God’s mission that the rest of the Bible clearly requires of God’s people. However, it is one thing to say (rightly) that we *must* engage in evangelism. It is another thing altogether to say (wrongly, as I have tried to argue) that evangelism is the *only* thing that constitutes engaging in mission.

The word *priority* suggests something that has to be your starting point. A priority is whatever is most important or urgent. It is the thing that must get done first before anything else. However, a different way of thinking about mission would be to imagine a whole circle of all the needs and opportunities that God calls (or sends) us to address in the world. This is best done when thinking of a local specific context, of course, rather than attempting it globally. One can construct a spider chart in which presenting problems are traced to deeper causes, and they in turn are related to other underlying problems and factors. Eventually, a complex web of interconnected factors is discerned, constituting the whole range of brokenness and need, of sin and evil, of suffering and loss that may be found in any given human situation, personal or social. The list of contributing factors will doubtless include those that are spiritual, moral, physical, familial, political, environmental, educational, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and many more.

The question then is posed: What constitutes the good news of the biblical gospel in this whole circle of interlocking presenting needs and underlying causes? What is the mission of God in relation to this whole nexus? How does the power of the cross impinge on each of the evils that are at work here? That should produce a very broad answer—as broad as the scale of the problem, for the gospel addresses all that sin has touched, which is everything.

In an excellent reflection on what constitutes holistic mission (based on a lifetime of personal crosscultural mission in different ministries and locations), Jean-Paul Heldt suggests that we must look at any human problem in the four basic dimensions of our human existence—*physical, mental, spiritual and social*.¹⁹ As we do so, we uncover different underlying causes of presenting problems, and then, of course, we need to apply the power of the gospel to all such causes and their effects. He illustrates his point (and mine) from the prevalent and recurrent problem of night blindness in children, biologically the result of lack of vitamin A. But then he goes on to chart the range of factors that are involved.

Night blindness has interlocking causes. Night blindness is indeed a symptom of vitamin A deficiency (biological causation). Yet that deficiency is primarily the result of malnutrition, which occurs in a context of poverty (such as inequitable land distribution, unjust labor laws and unfair wage structures). Finally, at the root of social injustice lie greed and selfishness, which are essentially moral and spiritual values. It is then not realistic to expect to cure and prevent night blindness with vitamin A drops unless we also address and confront the issues of malnutrition, poverty, social injustice, and, ultimately, selfishness and greed.²⁰

Such a process of analysis and discernment will give us some idea of the scope of a holistic missional response to the situation we are considering. So the next question has to be, Where do we start? The language of the “priority of evangelism” implies that the only proper starting point must always be evangelistic proclamation. *Priority* means it is the most important, most urgent, thing to be done first, and everything else must take second, third or fourth place. But the difficulty with this is that (1) it is not always possible or desirable in the immediate situation, and (2) it does not even reflect the actual practice of Jesus.

Rather, almost any *starting* point can be appropriate, depending possibly on what is the most pressing or obvious need. We can *enter* the circle of missional

¹⁹I have taught the same fourfold dimension of human life for many years, both in expounding Genesis and in teaching biblical foundations for mission. Further reflection on this is offered in chapter 13.

²⁰Jean-Paul Heldt, “Revisiting the ‘Whole Gospel’: Toward a Biblical Model of Holistic Mission in the 21st Century,” *Missiology* 32 (2004): 157.

response at any point on the circle of human need. *But ultimately* we must not rest content until we have included within our own missional response the wholeness of *God's* missional response to the human predicament—and that of course includes the good news of Christ, the cross and resurrection, the forgiveness of sin, the gift of eternal life that is offered to men and women through our witness to the gospel and the hope of God's new creation. That is why I speak of ultimacy rather than primacy. Mission may not always *begin* with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately *include* declaring the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task. It is defective mission, not holistic mission.

Our study of the exodus in chapter eight illustrates this. God broke into the circle of Israel's need at the level of their economic exploitation and genocidal affliction at the hands of the Egyptians. Having *redeemed* them through the exodus (and that is how the language is first used), God went on to provide for their *physical* needs in the wilderness. Then he entered into a *covenant* relationship with them after revealing his name, his character and his law. All of this, he said, was so that they would truly *know* him as the living God and *worship* him alone. Then he provided the place of his own dwelling where they could *meet* with him, and finally, the system of *sacrifices* by which they could maintain that relationship and deal with sin and uncleanness through the *atonement* God provided. All kinds of elements are involved in this total experience and the narrative that describes it. But *ultimately* the goal was that God's people should know God and love him with wholehearted loyalty, worship and obedience. It is a rich and pregnant model for mission.

Evangelism and social involvement: Chicken or egg? Another way the issue is sometimes framed is this: Surely the best way to achieve social change and all the good objectives we have for society on the basis of what we know God wants (justice, integrity, compassion, care for his creation, etc.) is by vigorous evangelism. The more Christians there are, the better it will be for society. So if you want to change society, do evangelism. Then those who become Christians will do the social action part. I have often heard this as an argument for prioritizing evangelism over social action, and it sounds very plausible, but it has some serious flaws. Again, let me emphasize that what follows is in no way intended to deny that evangelism is utterly vital but rather to deny that it can carry the weight of obedience to the rest of the Bible's commands regarding our social responsibilities in the world.

First (and I think I owe this point to John Stott), there is flawed logic in the assertion that says, If you are a Christian, you should not spend time doing social action. Instead give all your time to evangelism because the best way to

change society is to multiply the number of Christians. The logic is flawed because (1) all those new Christians will, following the same advice, give time only to evangelism, so who is going to be engaging in the social engagement side of mission? And (2) you ought to be engaging in social action since you yourself are the product of someone else's evangelism. So by your own logic you should be the one to get involved in the social activity you are so readily transferring to the fruit of your own evangelistic efforts. In other words, the argument becomes an infinite regress in which real social engagement as part of Christian mission in the world is conveniently postponed from one generation of converts to the next, with each one feeling a spurious justification for passing the buck.

Second, this view overlooks the importance of example. We all tend to imitate those who have most influenced us. If someone comes to faith through the effort of a Christian or a church that endorses only the evangelistic mandate and has a negative and nonengaged attitude to all things social, cultural, economic or political, then the likelihood is that the new convert will imbibe, consciously or otherwise, the same dichotomized attitude. We teach as we were taught. We reflect the kind of mission that moved us into faith. Evangelism that offers a safe long-term personal exit strategy from the world rather than a missional engagement with the world is likely to produce Christians and churches that have little cutting edge in the surrounding culture and little incentive as to how or why they ought to have anyway. Evangelism that multiplies Christians who are only interested in more evangelism but who are not wrestling with the challenge of being salt and light in the working world around them may boost church-growth statistics. But we should not pretend that it is an adequate way, let alone the best way, to fulfill the rest of our biblical obligations in society.

Third, and tragically, this view is simply not borne out in the history of Christian mission. Now of course there is such a thing as conversion uplift. That is, the fact that when people become Christians from very poor and deprived backgrounds, they tend to shed some harmful habits (e.g., squandering resources on gambling, alcohol, etc.) and acquire some positive ones (such as a new sense of personal worth and the dignity of work, caring for others, providing for their family, honesty, etc.). The effect can contribute to an upward social drift and can certainly benefit a community if enough people are affected in this way.

However, there are other instances where rapid conversion of whole communities to a pietistic gospel that sings the songs of Zion to come but demands no radical concern for the social, political, ethnic and cultural implications of the whole biblical faith here and now has led to massive and embarrassing dissonance between statistics and reality. Some of the states in northeast India, such as Nagaland, are held up as outstanding examples of the success of late-

nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century evangelism. Whole tribes were converted. The state is recorded to be around 90 percent Christian. Yet it has now become one of the most corrupt states in the Indian Union and is riddled with problems of gambling and drugs among the younger generation. Naga students at the Union Biblical Seminary, where I taught in the 1980s, would tell me this as proof of the fact that merely successful evangelism does not always result in lasting social transformation. Others will point with desperate and baffled sadness at the tragic irony of Rwanda—one of the most Christianized nations on earth and birthplace of the East African Revival. And yet whatever form of Christian piety was taken to be the fruit of evangelism there could not stand against the tide of intertribal hatred and violence that engulfed the region in 1994. The blood of tribalism, it was said, was thicker than the water of baptism. Again, successful evangelism, flourishing revivalist spirituality and a majority Christian population did not result in a society where God's biblical values of equality, justice, love and nonviolence had taken root and flourished likewise.

I write as a son of Northern Ireland. That has to be one of the most "evangelized" small patches on the globe. As I grew up, almost anybody I met could have told me the gospel and "how to get saved." Street corner evangelism was a common feature of the urban scene. I took part in it myself on occasions. Yet in my Protestant evangelical culture, the zeal for evangelism was equal only to the suspicion of any form of Christian social concern or conscience about issues of justice. That was the domain of liberals and ecumenicals, and a betrayal of the "pure" gospel. The result was that the de facto politics of Protestantism was actually subsumed under the gospel in such a way that all the political prejudice, partisan patriotism and tribal hatred was sanctified rather than prophetically challenged (except by a very brave few who often paid a heavy price). So the proportionately high number of the evangelizers and the evangelized (in comparison with any other part of the United Kingdom) certainly did not produce a society transformed by the values of the kingdom of God. On the contrary, it was (and sadly still is) possible to hear all the language of evangelistic zeal and all the language of hatred, bigotry, and violence coming from the same mouths. As James would say, "this should not be" (Jas 3:10). But it is. And it is one reason why I beg to dissent from the notion that evangelism by itself will result in social change, unless Christians are also taught the radical demands of discipleship to the Prince of peace, are seeking first the kingdom of God and his justice, and understand the wholeness of what the Bible so emphatically shows to be God's mission for his people.

Holistic mission needs the whole church. A final question that is often raised in the context of teaching holistic mission arises from unavoidable per-

sonal limitations. "You are saying that Christian mission involves all these dimensions of God's concern for total human need," someone will say. "But I am finite, with finite time, finite abilities and finite opportunities. Should I not then stick to what seems most important—evangelism—and not try to dissipate myself over such a broad range of otherwise desirable objectives. I can't do everything!"

No, of course you can't. The same thought doubtless occurred to God, which is why he called the church into existence. Here is another reason why our ecclesiology must be rooted in missiology. The mission of God in the world is vast. So he has called and commissioned a people—originally the descendants of Abraham, now a multinational global community in Christ. And it is through the *whole* of that people that God is working his mission purposes out, in all their diversity.

Of course every individual cannot do everything. There are different callings, different giftings, different forms of ministry (remembering that magistrates and other government officials of the state are called "ministers of God" in Rom 13, just as much as apostles and those who organized food aid). Individuals must seek personal guidance from God regarding the particular niche in which they will engage in whatever sphere of mission God has called them to. Some are indeed called to be evangelists. All are certainly called to be witnesses, whatever their context of work. The apostles in Acts recognized their own personal priority had to be the ministry of the Word and prayer. But they did not see that as the only priority for the church as a whole. Caring for the needs of the poor was another essential priority of the community and its evangelistic attractiveness. So they appointed people who would have as *their* priority the practical administration of food distribution to the needy. That did not limit their ministry to such work (as Philip's evangelistic encounter with the Ethiopian shows), but it does show that the overall work of the church requires different people to have different gifts and priorities.

The question is, Is the *church as a whole* reflecting the wholeness of God's redemption? Is the church (thinking here of the local church as the organism effectively and strategically placed for God's mission in any given community) aware of all that God's mission summons them to participate in? Is the church, through the combined engagement of *all* its members, applying the redemptive power of the cross of Christ to *all* the effects of sin and evil in the surrounding lives, society and environment?

The ringing slogan of the Lausanne movement is: "The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." Holistic mission cannot be the responsibility of any one individual. But it is certainly the responsibility of the whole church.

In conclusion, I can do no better than endorse the fine conclusion of Jean-Paul Heldt's article:

There is no longer a need to qualify mission as "holistic," nor to distinguish between "mission" and "holistic mission." Mission is, by definition, "holistic," and therefore "holistic mission" is, *de facto*, mission. Proclamation alone, apart from any social concern, may be perceived as a distortion, a truncated version of the true gospel, a parody and travesty of the good news, lacking relevance for the real problems of real people living in the real world. On the other end of the spectrum, exclusive focus on transformation and advocacy may just result in social and humanitarian activism, void of any spiritual dimension. Both approaches are unbiblical; they deny the wholeness of human nature of human beings created in the image of God. Since we are created "whole," and since the Fall affects our total humanity in all its dimensions, then redemption, restoration, and mission can, by definition, only be "holistic."²¹

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 166.

The Span of God's Missional Covenant

The whole historical covenant between Yahweh and Israel had from the beginning a universal dimension. The nations are real witnesses. Yahweh's saving actions, the punishments and the restoration that he imposed on Israel were at the same time a preaching to the nations.¹

With these bold words Walter Vogels opens up for us a missiological approach to the various covenants in the Bible. With the concept of covenant we come to another major plank in Israel's self-identity or worldview. So far we have considered the missiological dimensions of their *election*—their conviction that they were a people uniquely chosen by God, yet for a purpose that reached far beyond themselves (in chaps. 6-7). Then we reflected on the narrative of the exodus as the prime event through which Israel understood the meaning of *redemption* and could speak of themselves as redeemed by God (chap. 8). In both cases we traced the main themes with their missiological dimensions through into the New Testament where they are developed and relaunched as part of the driving force of Christian mission.

Here we come to the next milepost on Israel's journey with God after the exodus—the confirmation of God's *covenant* with them at Sinai. Israel believed themselves to be in a unique relationship with YHWH, a relationship that they likened to the treaty covenants between nations and empires in their wider international world. The covenant at Sinai is a fresh articulation of the original seminal covenant that God made with Abraham, in the light of the new historical reality generated by the exodus. The descendants of Abraham have now

¹Walter Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1986), pp. 67-68.

indeed become a great nation. What will it mean for them to live within the framework of the Abrahamic covenant as a national community? That framework needed a lot of expansion and consolidation to serve as a constitution for the nation's life. The Sinai covenant provides that.

As the nation's life went on, the arrival of monarchy led to another development in the covenant relationship, as God initiated the particular covenant with David and his successors on the throne. The failure of so many of the kings of Israel and Judah, however, called into question the viability of God's whole project in and through Israel. A new vision of the future begins to emerge as several prophets look forward to a new era of covenant relationship in which the old imperfections would be eradicated and God's intentions for Israel and his mission through them would be fulfilled. This hope leads us straight to Jesus, in whom, according to Jesus himself and his first interpreters, that new covenant was inaugurated.

If we have learned anything from a century of Old Testament theology it is that it is futile to isolate any single theme or category as the sole organizing center for the whole discipline. Old Testament theology is not like a wheel with a single theological hub at the center of radiating spokes. Rather, it is like a cable, with several closely entwined wires running along together at the core. So, while it would be rash these days to suggest that covenant is *the* center of the Old Testament faith, it will be granted that the covenant theme may be regarded as one of the core wires. Covenant is one of several major components in Israel's essential theological self-understanding. And the sequence of covenants in the canonical narrative offers us *one* fruitful way of presenting the grand narrative that constitutes the cable.

This grand narrative embodied Israel's coherent worldview, a worldview that included their own sense of election, identity and role in the midst of the nations. The biblical story can be organized and told in many ways (as Jesus demonstrated with his parable of the tenants in the vineyard). But the key point is that it *is* a narrative in which we can look backward to its beginnings in Genesis and forward to its anticipated climax in the new creation. The sequence of covenants is one way to make our way through that historical narrative and also provides a major clue to its significance and eventual outcome.² Let's then trace that sequence with our missiological hermeneutic in mind.

The question for us in this chapter, then, in the context of our argument

²In an earlier book I surveyed the sequence of covenants as one way to understand Jesus in the light of the Old Testament story and promise. See Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Monarch, 2005).

throughout the book, is, How we can read the covenant tradition in the biblical texts missiologically? That is, in what ways do the various covenant formulations reveal the mission of God and the derivative mission of God's people in the world?

Noah

The narrative of the covenant that God made with Noah in Genesis 8:15–9:17 is the first explicit reference to covenant-making in the biblical text. Although some theological systems speak of an Adamic covenant, the relationship between God and Adam is not described in that way in the text of Genesis.³ So our survey of covenant begins with Noah. The Noachic covenant establishes at least two foundational points that are relevant to the rest of the biblical concept of mission.

God's commitment to all life on earth. In the context of God's radical judgment on the comprehensive nature of human sin (repeatedly portrayed as "violence and corruption"), God still commits himself to the created order itself and to the preservation of life on the planet. Although we live on a *cursed* earth, we also live on a *covenanted* earth. There is an unambiguous universality about God's covenantal self-commitment here: His promise is not only with humanity but also with "every living creature on earth" (Gen 9:10). This Noachic covenant provides the platform for the ongoing mission of God throughout the rest of human and natural history, and thereby also, of course, the platform for our own mission in participation with his. Whatever God does, or whatever God calls us to do, there is a basic stability to the context of all our history.

This does not of course mean that God would never again use his natural creation as the agent of his judgment as well as his blessing (as the rest of the Old Testament amply testifies). But it does set limits to such actions *within history*. Apart from the final judgment of God that will bring an end to fallen human history as we presently know and experience it on this sinful planet, the curse will never again be expressed in an act of comprehensive destruction as the flood. This is God's earth, and God is covenantally committed to its survival, just as later revelation will show us that God is also covenantally committed to its ultimate redemption. Even the final judgment will not mean the end of *the earth as God's creation* but the end of the sinful condition that has subjected the whole of cre-

³However, a strong case for seeing a covenantal pattern in the prefall relationship between God and creation (including humankind), even though the term itself is not used in Genesis 1–2, is argued by Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, chap. 1. He draws on other biblical texts as allusions to such an understanding. These include Amos 1:9; Hos 2:20; 6:7; Is 24:5; 54:9–17; Jer 33:20–25; Ezek 34:25; Zech 11:10; Sir 17:12; 44:18.

ation to its present frustration. Our mission then takes place within the framework of God's universal promise to the created order. This is a framework that gives security and scope to all our mission: security because we operate within the parameters of God's commitment to our planet, and scope because there is nothing and no place on earth that lies outside the writ of God's covenant with Noah. The rainbow promise spans whatever horizon we can ever see.

The ecological dimension of mission. The language with which God addresses Noah at the end of the flood clearly echoes Genesis 1. In a sense this is a fresh start for all creation. So Noah and his family are blessed and instructed to fill the earth and (though not with the same phrase) to have dominion over it. The creation mandate is renewed. The human task remains the same—to exercise authority over the rest of the creation, but to do so with care and respect for life, symbolized in the prohibition on eating animal blood (Gen 9:4). So there is a human mission built into our origins in God's creation and God's purpose for creation. To care for creation is in fact the first purposive statement that is made about the human species; it is our primary mission on the planet. The covenant with Noah effectively renews this mission, within the context of God's own commitment to creation. We will look more fully at the ecological dimension of biblical mission in chapter twelve.

Abraham

We have examined the Abrahamic covenant and its missiological implications in depth in chapters six and seven. However, for the sake of completeness in this chapter, it may be helpful to summarize our key findings here also.

From a missiological perspective, the covenant with Abraham is the most significant of all the biblical covenants. It was the origin of God's election of Israel as the means he would use to bless the nations, and it undergirds Paul's theology and practice of mission to the Gentiles in the New Testament. Within the Old Testament context it is theologically proper to see the covenants at Sinai and with David not as wholly distinct covenantal arrangements but as developments of the covenant with Abraham in new circumstances. Richard Bauckham, reflecting on the missiological aspects of these three covenants, sees them all as characteristically moving *from the one to the many*, which he also sees as the dynamic of the key biblical category of election.

God singles out first Abraham, then Israel, then David. The three movements that begin with these three choices by God each has its own distinctive theme, one aspect of God's purpose for the world. We could call these the thematic trajectories of the narrative. The trajectory that moves from Abraham to all the

families of the earth is the trajectory of blessing. The trajectory that moves from Israel to all the nations is the trajectory of God's revelation of himself to the world. The trajectory that moves from God's enthronement of David in Zion to the ends of the earth is the trajectory of rule, of God's kingdom coming in all creation. Of course, these three movements and themes are closely interrelated.⁴

The canonical context: Genesis 1—11. The Old Testament begins on the stage of universal history. After the accounts of creation we read the story of God's dealings with fallen humanity and the problem and challenge of the world of the nations (Gen 1—11). After the stories of the Fall, Cain and Abel, the flood, and the tower of Babel, could there be any future for the nations in relation to God? Or would judgment have to be God's final word? It is against this background of universal sinfulness and divine judgment that we are introduced to God's determination to "bless." Blessing, of course, had been a key word in the early chapters of Genesis. Now it becomes God's answer to a broken world.

The universality of the ultimate goal: "All families/nations of the earth will find blessing." The covenant with Abraham is God's answer to the problems posed by Genesis 1—11. God's declared commitment is that he intends to bring blessing to the nations: "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3, author's translation). Repeated six times in Genesis alone, this key affirmation is the foundation of biblical mission, inasmuch as it presents the mission of God. The Creator God has a purpose, a goal, and it is nothing less than blessing the nations of humanity. So fundamental is this divine agenda that Paul defines the Genesis text as declaring "the gospel in advance" (Gal 3:8). And the concluding vision of the whole Bible signifies the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, as people from every nation, tribe, language and people are gathered among the redeemed in the new creation (Rev 7:9).

The gospel and mission both begin in Genesis, and both are located in the redemptive intention of the Creator to bless the nations as the bottom line of God's covenant with Abraham. Mission is God's address to the problem of fractured humanity. And God's mission is universal in its ultimate goal and scope.

The particularity of the means: "Through you, and your descendants . . ." The same Genesis texts that affirm the universality of God's mission to bless the nations also and with equal strength affirm the particularity of God's election of Abraham and his descendants to be the vehicle of that mission.⁵ The blessing of

⁴Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), p. 27.

⁵On the exegetical questions surrounding the meaning of "through you" and the form of the verb (whether it is passive or reflexive), see the full discussion on pp. 252-54 in chap 7.

the nations will come about “through you and your seed.” The election of Israel is assuredly one of the most fundamental pillars of the biblical worldview and of Israel’s historical sense of identity.⁶

It is vital to insist that although the belief in their election was vulnerable to being distorted into a narrow doctrine of national superiority, that move was resisted in Israel’s own literature (e.g., Deut 7:7-11). The affirmation is that YHWH, the God who had chosen Israel, was also the Creator, Owner and Lord of the whole world (Deut 10:14-22; cf. Ex 19:4-6). That is, YHWH was not just Israel’s God—he was God of all (as Paul insists so emphatically in Rom 4). YHWH had chosen Israel in relation to his purpose for the world, not just for Israel. The election of Israel, therefore, was not tantamount to a rejection of the nations but explicitly for their ultimate benefit. Election is missional in its purpose. If I might paraphrase John, in a way he would probably have accepted, “God so loved the world that he chose Israel.”⁷

Sinai

The covenant with Abraham was reconfirmed and given broader substance in the national covenant with Israel, mediated through Moses at Mount Sinai. The volume of relevant textual material would be overwhelming at this point, so for our more limited purpose we will confine ourselves to three texts that bear on the wider missiological dimension of the Sinai covenant.

The first comes from the narrative prologue to the Sinai covenant in Exodus and speaks of Israel’s missional role as God’s *priesthood*. The second comes from the climax of covenant legislation in Leviticus and highlights the essential *presence* of God as a missional distinctive of God’s people. The third comes from the concluding chapters of the whole Torah in Deuteronomy and points us forward to the *prognosis* for Israel’s history that eventually lays the foundation for New Testament missional theology and practice.

God’s mission and God’s priesthood: Exodus 19:4-6

You yourselves have seen what I have done to Egypt,
and I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to myself.

⁶The importance of this central core of Israel’s worldview for the whole mission of the biblical God through the people of God for the world is made abundantly clear in the works of N. T. Wright, especially *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

⁷Stimulating missiological reflection on the particularity and universality dimensions of the Abraham covenant and of the nature of God himself is found throughout Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*.

Now then, if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant,
 you will be for me */li/* a special personal possession
 among all the peoples;
 for to me */li/* belongs the whole earth.
 But you, you will be for me */li/* a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.
 (Ex 19:4-6, author's translation)

Exodus 19:4-6 is a key programmatic statement by God, coming, like a hinge in the book of Exodus, in between the exodus narrative (Ex 1—18) and the giving of the law and covenant (Ex 20—24). It defines the identity of Israel and the role God has for them. Further, it sets Israel's identity and role in the historical context of God's past action on behalf of Israel, and in the universal context of God's ownership of the whole earth. It functions as a narrative and theological preamble to the promulgation of the Sinai covenant in the rest of Exodus and Leviticus, so that we must view all the specific details of that covenant from the perspective of this word of orientation. This is a crucial, context-setting orientation to all that follows.

We have already considered one feature of this text in chapter seven (see pp. 255-57). There we observed both the *universality* of its reference to the whole earth and all nations alongside the *particularity* of its description of Israel as YHWH's special personal possession (*ségullâ*). In both respects it has remarkable affinity with the Abrahamic covenant. We will return yet again to the same text in chapter eleven, when we consider the *ethical* implications of Israel's call to be a *holy* nation. Here we are concerned simply with the first part of the double identity that God gives to Israel—to be a "*priestly* kingdom."⁸

To understand what it meant for Israel as a whole to be called God's priesthood in relation to the nations, we have to understand what Israel's priests were in relation to the rest of the people. Priests stood in the middle between God and the rest of the people. In that intermediate position, priests then had a two-fold task:

- *Teaching the law* (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; Jer 18:18; Mal 2:6-7; Hos 4:1-9). Through the priests God would be known to the people. This was a major duty of Old Testament priests, the neglect of which led to moral and social decay and the prophetic anger reflected in the words of Hosea and Malachi above.

⁸It is most likely that this is the correct English word order for the noun and adjective in translating the Hebrew phrase "kingdom of priests." Israel is to be not so much a royal priesthood (whatever that might mean) but a kingdom (in the relatively neutral sense) consisting of priests.

- *Handling the sacrifices* (Lev 1—7). Through the priests and their work of atonement the people could come to God. The priests did the actions with the blood at the altar and made the declaration of atonement to the worshiper.

The priesthood was thus a two-directional representational or mediatory task between God and the rest of the Israelites, bringing the knowledge of God to the people and bringing the sacrifices of the people to God. In addition to these twin tasks, it was of course a prime privilege and responsibility of the priests to *bless the people* in the name of YHWH (Num 6:22-27).

It is thus richly significant that God confers on Israel as a whole people the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations. As the people of YHWH they would have the historical task of bringing the knowledge of God to the nations, and bringing the nations to the means of atonement with God. The Abrahamic task of being a means of blessing to the nations also put them in the role of priests in the midst of the nations. Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so it would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations.

This dual movement in the priestly role (from God to people and from people to God) is reflected in prophetic visions concerning the nations, which included both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics. There would be a going out from God and a coming in to God. On the one hand, the law or the justice or the light of YHWH would go out to the nations from Israel or from Zion. On the other hand, the nations could be pictured as coming to YHWH or to Israel or to Jerusalem / Zion. (We will explore these themes in chap. 14.)

The priesthood of the people of God is thus a missional function that stands in continuity with their Abrahamic election, and it affects the nations. Just as Israel's priests were called and chosen to be the servants of God and his people, so Israel as a whole is called and chosen to be the servant of God and all peoples.

John Goldingay connects the text with Genesis 12:1-3.

The fact that Exodus 19:3-8 is a form of reworking of Genesis 12:1-3 reminds us that this designation links with YHWH's lordship over the whole world and works toward the world's inclusion rather than its exclusion. The stretching of the royal priesthood to include other peoples (Rev. 1:6) is in keeping with the Abrahamic vision.⁹

One might add the even more universal extension of the phrase in Revela-

⁹John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 374.

tion 5:9-10. Strangely, however, Goldingay says, "Describing Israel as a priesthood does not attribute to it a priestly role on behalf of the world or between God and the world."¹⁰ But provided we understand this role carefully, in the way that I have suggested, it seems to me that this is precisely what was attributed to Israel.

Alec Motyer is also reluctant to see an intermediary role for Israel among the nations in this text.

Many interpret the priesthood of Israel as referring to them as a mediating nation, bringing the knowledge of God to the world. . . . This is certainly not the main understanding of priesthood within the Old Testament. . . . The substantial truth . . . of the "priesthood of all believers" in both the Old and New Testament . . . is access into the holy presence.¹¹

However, Motyer overlooks the representative dimension of that access into the presence of God, which was (in the case of Israelite priests) on behalf of the rest of the people and (in the case of God's people as a whole) on behalf of the rest of the world (e.g., in prayer). "Israel as a 'kingdom of priests' is Israel committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh's Presence."¹² Later, Motyer does acknowledge that Israel's priestly status and access to God constitute "the public testimony of holiness whereby they show themselves to the world in all their distinctiveness."¹³ This public distinctiveness, however, is what I argue to be part of Israel's missional identity and role.

Walter Vogels observes:

The priest was an intermediary and, therefore, had a mission between God and men. If we apply this concept to Israel as a people, it suggests that Israel is also an intermediary between God and the nations. . . .

[Israel] is set apart—distinctive from all other nations—to be consecrated to Yahweh, to be in his service, a position which ultimately means service towards the nations. Israel's privilege is one of service. Israel was taken from among the nations to be at the service of the nations. Election and covenant are thus not an end in themselves but a means towards something else. This text (Ex. 19:3-8) confirms what we have seen before in the promises to Abraham. He would become a people from whom all the nations would one day receive blessings of salvation.

Israel is mediator. She must bring mankind closer to God, pray to God for mankind, and intercede for mankind, as Abraham did. Her service to God is in the

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 199.

¹²Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 263.

¹³Motyer, *Message of Exodus*, p. 200.

name of others. But Israel has also to bring God closer to men, by bringing them God's revelation, his light and the good news of salvation.¹⁴

This then conveys something of the broader missional significance of Israel's identity as a priestly people for YHWH in the midst of the nations.

We should remember, however, that this identity and role was dependent on the condition that stood above it: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant . . ." (Ex 19:5). Keeping God's covenant was thus not a condition of their redemption. God did not say, "If you obey me and keep my covenant, I will save you and you will be my people." He already had and they already were. No, obedience to the covenant was not a condition of *salvation* but a condition of their *mission*. Only through covenant obedience and community holiness could they claim or fulfill the identity and role here offered to them. The mission of priesthood among the nations is covenantal, and like the covenant itself, its fulfillment and enjoyment is inseparable from ethical obedience. That is why it is immediately followed by "holy nation"—the ethical implications of which we will consider in chapter eleven.

In the New Testament, Peter sees the priestly nature of the church as "declaring the praises" of our exodus God and living in such a way among the nations that they come to glorify God (1 Pet 2:9-12). This is an authentic combination of the missional and ethical reapplication of Exodus 19:4-6. Significantly also, in the only New Testament text to speak of any individual Christian's ministry in priestly terms, Paul describes his *evangelistic* mission as his "priestly duty." Immediately he refers to the same double direction of movement—bringing the gospel to the nations and bringing the nations to God (Rom 15:16). The ethical dimension of the task actually forms an envelope around the whole letter, as Paul twice gives it as his life's work to bring about "the obedience of faith among the nations" (Rom 1:5; 16:26, author's translation).

God's mission and God's presence: Leviticus 26:11-13. "I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" (Lev 26:12).

The presence of God in the midst of his people was one of the most essential and most precious features of the covenant. The covenantal context of this promise here in Leviticus 26 is very clear. It is conditional on Israel's obedience: "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands" (Lev 26:3). But it is also grounded in the historical redeeming grace of God (Lev 26:13). This double basis is essentially the same as we saw in Exodus 19:4-6. So the

¹⁴Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, pp. 48-49.

presence of God, dwelling and walking among his people, is, on the one hand, the goal of God's own act of redemption and, on the other, the fruit of his people's response of obedience. It is God's *covenant* presence.

Eden restored—for all. However, we immediately remind ourselves of the purpose for which this covenant with Israel existed in the first place. It was part of God's long-term mission to bring blessing to all nations and all creation. Indeed, the language of Leviticus 26 up to this point is replete with echoes of the Genesis portrait of creation under God's blessing (especially fruitfulness and increase) or of the rolling back of the curse (in peace and the absence of danger). Even the phrase "I will walk among you" uses a very rare form of the verb *hālak* (the hithpael), which is also used in Genesis 3:8 to describe God's habit of spending the cool of the day just strolling with Adam and Eve in the garden. The covenant presence of God will be a return to the intimacy of Eden. Ultimately, God's presence among his people must point to the blessing of his presence in all the earth. And thereby, what would be true for Israel in covenant blessing—the enjoyment of God's presence—would eventually be true for all who would enter into the same blessing through the outworking of God's covenant with Abraham.

In the act of fulfilling the covenant, YHWH will bring creation itself to fulfillment: "I will make you fruitful and multiply you." . . . The promise [of Lev 26:9-13] thus brings together creation, exodus, covenant and presence. In the covenant, YHWH is bringing the purpose of creation itself to completion in the experience of blessing and of the very presence of God.¹⁵

Another connection here is between the *creation* (and especially the Garden of Eden) as the original temple of God (where human beings ruled and served in the capacity of kings and priests) and the *tabernacle* (and later the temple), which was a microcosm of that cosmic temple. The presence of God in Israel's tabernacle and temple looked backward to his presence in Eden, and forward to his ultimate presence among all nations in a renewed creation (Rev 21—22).¹⁶

God's presence as Israel's distinctiveness. In the meantime, however, it was to be God's covenantal presence in Israel that would mark them out as distinctive from the rest of the nations. This would be the purpose of the tabernacle. After God had given the instructions for every part of it, the purpose of the whole tabernacle was spelled out in this way, stressing once again its covenantal sig-

¹⁵Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:371.

¹⁶On this theme and its rich missiological implications see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Leicester, U.K.: Apollos; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

nificance. The very purpose of redemption was so that God should dwell among his people.

So I will consecrate the Tent of Meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Ex 29:44-46)

Even before the tabernacle could be built, however, the presence of God among his people is put in danger by their blatant apostasy. The narrative of Exodus 32–34 records the sin of Israel and Aaron together, while Moses was on Mount Sinai, which threatened to bring the destructive wrath of God instead of his covenant presence. In the protracted negotiated settlement that Moses as intercessor eventually reaches with God, God at one point concedes that he will not destroy the Israelites, but refuses to go any farther with them in person. He offers to send an angel instead. He himself will no longer be with them (Ex 33:1-5).

But that will not do for Moses. Moses knows that without God's presence, the covenant is as good as dead. "Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?' " (Ex 33:15-16).

But Moses knows more than that. He knows that without the presence of the Lord God, Israel would be no different from the rest of the nations. And *only by Israel being distinct from the nations was there any purpose in being Israel at all*, or any hope for the nations themselves eventually. "*What else* [than the presence of God] will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?' " (Ex 33:16).

The question is rhetorical, and successfully makes its point in the negotiation. But actually there was rather *a lot else* that was meant to distinguish Israel from the nations, as Moses knew very well.¹⁷ Ethical holiness, for example, and ritual cleanness, to name but two. Indeed, the lack of either or both of these would put the continuing presence of God among his people in severe jeopardy (as Ezekiel saw clearly). So let's look at them both.

God's presence requires ethical holiness. The ethical demands that the Sinai covenant laid upon Israel are well known, filling as they do large sections of Exodus and Deuteronomy. But the purpose for which Israel was summoned to live

¹⁷The extent and pervasiveness of the theme of Israel's self-conscious distinctiveness from the nations is surveyed and analyzed in Peter Machinist, "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.

according to the ways of YHWH—the way of justice, truth, integrity, compassion and so on—was not merely for their own good or even merely to keep God happy. A major part of the motivation underlying Old Testament ethics is the challenge for Israel to be visibly different from the surrounding nations. *Religious* distinctiveness was to be embodied in *ethical* distinctiveness, both of which are included in the rich concept of holiness. And it would be this ethical distinctiveness of Israel that would be a pointer to the presence of the ethical God, YHWH, in their midst. This too is a dimension of meaning of the well-known equation, “You shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19:2 KJV).

That is why Moses can urge Israel to live according to God’s law with a motivational eye on the watching nations. They will see the difference, and questions will be asked—questions that, significantly, include the nearness of God in the midst of this people.

Observe [these laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6-8)

This strategically placed piece of covenantal motivation makes a powerful and missiologically significant connection between the presence of God, the ethical obedience of his people, and the observation of the nations. The missional relevance of Old Testament ethics will be explored further in chapter eleven, with a more detailed look at this key text.

God’s presence requires ritual cleanness. Ritual cleanness is the burden of much of Leviticus. How is it connected with the covenant promise of the presence of God dwelling among his people, the promise that is so powerfully articulated at the end of the book? And how can it possibly be understood in relation to a missional hermeneutic? The key lies in Israel’s conception of life.

In Israel’s ritual worldview, everything in life could be divided into two broad categories: the *holy* and the *profane* (or common). God and anything specifically dedicated to God or associated with him was holy. Everything else was just common or ordinary (the proper, neutral meaning of *profane*). But the realm of the common could be further divided in two, between that which was *clean* (the normal state of people and things) and that which was *unclean* (because of pollution or, sometimes, sin). Only that which was clean could come into the presence of God. And God himself could only dwell in the presence of what was clean.

So all of life, then, could be in a state of flux in one of two directions. The effect of sin and pollution was to render the holy profane and the clean unclean. But the blood of sacrifice and other rituals could reverse that process. Sacrificial blood (along with other rituals) would cleanse the unclean and make it clean again (and thereby acceptable to God). And sacrificial blood would be used to sanctify or consecrate the clean to make it holy. The one thing that should *never* happen is that the opposite ends of the spectrum come in contact—the unclean with the holy.¹⁸ God, the ultimate Holy One of Israel, cannot cohabit with uncleanness.

What then, in the light of this worldview, is the overall purpose of the sacrificial system and laws of cleanness in Leviticus? They were to maintain Israel in a fit condition for the holy God, YHWH, to live among. They were to deal with those things that would, if left uncovered and unatoned for, render Israel unfit for divine habitation.

But this then produces a logic that leads us back to the mission of God. In short:

- Holiness and cleanness were the preconditions of the *presence of God*.
- And the presence of God was the mark of *Israel's distinctiveness from the nations*.
- And Israel's distinctiveness from the nations was an essential component of *God's mission* for them in the world.

So we can see that even something so esoterically Israelite as their levitical, ritual and sacrificial system reflects the fundamentally missional orientation of Israel as God's holy and priestly people, embodying the presence of God in the midst of the nations.

In the New Testament, of course, we know that the levitical sacrifices were taken up and fulfilled in the final sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And we know that those laws of clean and unclean foods, which symbolized Israel's distinctiveness from the nations, are now abolished because that which they symbolized no longer obtains in Christ, where Jew and Gentile are now one. Nevertheless, the demand for moral and spiritual cleanliness is still forcefully applied in the context of new covenant loyalty to Christ. Paul quotes our text from Leviticus 26 in 2 Corinthians 6:16, precisely to urge Christians not to compromise their exclusive worship of Christ in temples of other gods, and to maintain their moral

¹⁸For a full explanation of this worldview and how the whole Levitical system fits within it, see, G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 15-29.

distinctiveness from unbelievers. Only thus would they be a fit dwelling place for their holy God. The old covenant background of the new covenant exhortation is very strong. So while the ritual badge of Israel's separation from the nations (the clean-unclean food laws) has gone, the necessity of spiritual and moral distinctiveness of the people of God certainly has not. It is still an essential part of our missional identity and responsibility.

God's presence lost, restored and extended to the nations. Returning to that old covenant: the trajectory from our passage in Leviticus 26 takes us to Ezekiel, who echoes it several times.

For Ezekiel the worst moment in his life, perhaps other than the death of his wife, was his vision of the glory of God departing from the temple (Ezek 8—10). “The glory,” is Ezekiel's favorite term for that tangible presence of YHWH that so filled the temple. But the temple had become a place of such wickedness and idolatry that the Lord could no longer bear to live there. In his vision God showed Ezekiel “the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary” (Ezek 8:6). So God left. Would he ever come back? That was the suspense that was only resolved by the explicit promise of God that, yes, he would. The presence of God would eventually be restored.

The whole section, Ezekiel 34—37, is then a coherent vision of a restored people of God living in covenant protection, covenant loyalty, covenant obedience, covenant unity and—above all—with the covenant dwelling place of God once again in their midst, in the language of Leviticus 26. And, most significantly for our argument here, *this restoration of the presence of God in a cleansed Israel will have its affect on the nations.*

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them for ever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them for ever. (Ezek 37:26-28)

It is a debatable point whether Ezekiel entertained the hope that the nations might actually be *saved* through knowing God in this way. But there can be no doubt at all that Ezekiel had a global frame of reference for what he believed God would do among his own people. The phrase “then they will know” echoes repeatedly like a refrain through these chapters. Whatever the result of such knowledge may be, *the nations will come to know God* when God once more dwells among his people. And that, after all, is the ultimate purpose of the whole final section of Ezekiel's book—the vision of the rebuilt temple and city.

For its significance lies in the name that the final two words of Ezekiel give it: “YHWH *šāmmâ*, The LORD is there!”—a phrase virtually equivalent to Isaiah’s more familiar “*‘immānû ʿēl*, God is with us!” The presence of God is restored to his city and his people (which become identical terms in biblical expectation).

Even if a message of hope for the nations cannot be unequivocally found in Ezekiel, other prophets proclaim it triumphantly. A full exposition must wait until chapter fourteen. Two texts, however, should be noted, in which it is the presence of God among his people (the essence of covenant relationship) that attracts the nations to come and join themselves to those who enjoy such a blessing.

Isaiah 60 pictures the nations coming to Israel as though on pilgrimage. By analogy with the Israelites’ own pilgrimages to Jerusalem, in which their priests would receive the offerings of the people presented to God at the temple, so the prophet poetically imagines the nations bringing their offerings to YHWH, with Israel functioning as priests for the nations (the role assigned to them in Ex 19:6; Is 61:6). The Israelites went up to Jerusalem and the temple because the Lord was there. So here, the nations will come to Israel for exactly the same reason. They will come to the worship center of the people of God because that is where they see the presence of God. Although the prophetic rhetoric can portray this in the language of defeat and submission, the primary goal is not to glorify Israel but to worship Israel’s God and live in his presence.¹⁹ They will come as those attracted out of darkness into light (Is 60:1-3), but that light will be greater than the sun, for it will be the Lord himself, present among his people (Is 60:19-20, a comparison that inspired the similar vision in Rev 21:22-24).

Zechariah 8 also promises that God will return once more to Zion to dwell with his people (Zech 8:3). The covenant relationship will thus be restored (Zech 8:7-8). The result is that curse will change to blessing. Echoes of the Abrahamic promise surface in verse 13. But the chapter concludes with the picture of the nations urgently encouraging one another to go find the Lord where he may be found—among the people where he dwells. This may be centripetal, but it is certainly also missional. People will clamor to join those who know the living God. God dwelling among his people should be the most attractive force field on earth.

Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, “Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and

¹⁹“The goal to be sought is not the extension of Israel’s kingdom, but the extension of God’s praise.” Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1999), p. 280, commenting on the universal vision of Ps 67.

seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going." And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zech 8:20-23)

Mission as building God's temple: God's multinational covenant dwelling place. Mission then may be compared to building the dwelling place of God and inviting the nations to come on home. And that is not far from the way Paul actually portrays it. Ephesians 2:11-22 is packed with covenant imagery, as Paul reminds his Gentile readers in the churches of Ephesus of the transformation that has taken place in their status with God. They have indeed come in from the cold, come home from afar.

The climax of that section of Ephesians, however, makes our point perfectly. What have the Gentiles, the outsider nations, joined up to in coming to Christ? Nothing less than being *part of the very temple of God*. They may have been physically excluded from inner parts of the temple in Jerusalem, as Gentiles, but spiritually they now constitute the dwelling place of God in Christ through the Spirit. The covenant privilege has been universalized through Jesus (cf. Eph 3:6). Such is the mystery of the mission of the gospel—"Christ among you"—that is, the Messiah dwelling among you Gentiles, the hope of glory—that is, the reality of the presence of God in your midst (Col 1:27).²⁰ For, as Paul has already said, the fullness of the person and presence of God dwells in Christ (Col 1:19; 2:9). So if Christ is now among the Gentiles, then the covenant presence of God—the prime privilege of Israel—has now been extended to the nations through Paul's missionary work and in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

And ultimately, of course, the temple of God will encompass not only his whole people redeemed from every tribe, nation, people and language but the whole cosmos, within which we will serve him as kings and priests. That is to say, humanity redeemed through Christ and modeled on Christ's perfect humanity will be restored to our proper and intended relationship with creation. The temple too, from the symbolism of Eden, through its earthly particularity in the Old Testament and its Christ-centered transformation in the New Testament, to its final universality in Revelation, also functions as a significant missional theme in Scripture.²¹

²⁰In my view the phrase *Christos en hymin* should be translated as "Christ among you" rather than simply "in you." Paul's point here is not simply the presence of the indwelling Christ in the hearts of believers, but (especially in view of the parallel passage of the letter to the Ephesians, where Paul explains what he means by "the mystery" [Eph 3:2-6]), the presence of the Messiah among the Gentiles through the preaching of the gospel and its acceptance by them.

²¹See especially, Beale, *Temple and Church's Mission*.

God's mission and God's prognosis: Deuteronomy 27—32. We began with the great prologue to the Sinai covenant in Exodus 19. Exodus 19:7-8 records that the people of Israel declared their wholehearted intention to do all that the Lord commanded. They repeat their commitment in Exodus 24:7. But by the time we reach the end of Deuteronomy, they have already on several signal occasions proved their inability to keep this promise (see esp. Ex 32—34; Num 14; and Moses' recollection of these and other rebellions in Deut 9). It is a tragic story in which the dissonance between the people's enthusiastic acceptance of the covenant and their utter failure to keep it had become painfully glaring.

Failure and curse. Worse is to come, for in these closing chapters of Deuteronomy, the Pentateuch ends with the gloomy prediction that this would not be the end of Israel's stiff-necked resistance to God's guiding. Their long future would be as wracked with recalcitrance as their short past.

At its simplest, Deuteronomy's anticipation of the future history of Israel was that, although Israel had been called and given every possible incentive to live in loyalty to their covenant Lord, they would in fact fail to do so. The book of Deuteronomy, for all its magnificent content, paradoxically begins and ends with failure: it opens by looking back to the failure of the generation of the exodus to go and take the land that God set before them, and it ends with the anticipated failure of the generations to come. Israel's endemically stiff-necked nature would lead to rebellion and disobedience.

As a result, the curses that were an integral part of the covenant (Lev 26; Deut 28) would fall, including the terrible threat of scattering among the nations. However, with great amazement and wonderful rhetoric (esp. Deut 30), Moses points beyond that judgment to offer the sure and certain hope of restoration and new life if the people would return and seek God once more. This is the scenario that flows through the great concluding section of the book, chapters 27—32 especially: failure, curse, scattering, return, restoration.

Israel and the nations intertwined in the story. Since Deuteronomy is a record of covenant renewal just prior to entry into the Promised Land, it sets this future anticipation in a thoroughly covenantal framework. And since the covenant with Israel was made in the full awareness that all the earth and all the nations belong to God, we should not be surprised to see that the nations are woven into this future projection in some highly significant ways—ways that are further taken up in the New Testament's understanding of God's mission for the world.

First, the nations *witness* Israel's failure and judgment and are shocked by it. They ask for, and are given, an explanation (Deut 28:37; 29:22-28). Second, the nations are also the human *agents* through whom God executes his judg-

ment in fulfillment of the covenant curses (Deut 28:49-52; 32:21-26). At this point the nations are enemies of Israel but also agents of God. Third, in the amazing inversion and paradox of Deuteronomy 32, God *vindicates* his people in the midst of the nations, in such a way that the nations are finally called on to *praise* YHWH and to rejoice *with* his people (Deut 32:27-43). It is not explained how this mysterious reversal will take place. The different scenes are simply set side by side.

- The nations will be enemies whom God will use to judge Israel.
- Yet God will also finally defend Israel against these very enemies.
- And God will ultimately lead all —Israel and nations together—to the praise and worship of the Lord God.

Thus, the history that will see the judgment and restoration of *Israel* will also see the judgment and blessing of the *nations*. Each sequence will be intertwined with the other. And the total sequence will be the outworking of the covenant in history.

Restoration of Israel and ingathering of the nations. In chapter fourteen, we will look further at the way the prophets handled this covenantal eschatology in relation to the nations. But for the moment we need to recognize that the influence of this Deuteronomic and covenantal theology of anticipated history on the New Testament's understanding of the mission of the church is profound.

It is clear that *Jesus* linked his own mission to the hope of the restoration of Israel and that the Gospel writers had the same interpretation of the significance of his ministry. N. T. Wright, for example, suggests that Matthew has shaped his Gospel not merely in terms of the five books of the Torah (a common scholarly view) but specifically in terms of the sequence of thought in the great final section of Deuteronomy 27—34. In doing so, Matthew brings out the significance of the story of Jesus “as the continuation and climax of the story of Israel, with the implicit understanding that this story is the clue to the story of the whole world.”²² Although Jesus limited his own ministry to the primary objective of the restoration of Israel, he left in his actions and words many hints of an expected ingathering of the nations, and he made that ingathering the explicit mission of his disciples after his resurrection.

It was, however, the apostle Paul who made the most use of Deuteronomy in his theological and missiological reflection. Not only did he see in the continued suffering of Israel a kind of prolongation of the curse of exile (a view shared by many first-century Jews), but he also saw in the death and resurrec-

²²N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 387-90.

tion of Jesus as the Messiah the climax of the judgment and the restoration of Israel respectively. Linking this with his central understanding of the significance of Israel *for the nations* (as the purpose of the Abrahamic covenant), Paul recognized that *the fulfillment of God's purpose for Israel could never be complete without the ingathering of the nations as well*. The failure of many of his contemporary Jews to respond to the message of Messiah Jesus had led to the extension of the good news to the Gentiles (e.g., Acts 13:44-48; Rom 11). But never, in Paul's thinking, did this mean a final rejection or replacement of the Jews.

Rather, in order to portray how he relates this ingathering of the Gentiles to God's ultimate purpose for Israel, Paul picks up a rhetorical pun in Deuteronomy 32:21 and develops it into a theology of history and mission.

They [the Israelites] made me jealous by a "no god"
and angered me with their worthless idols.
So I will make them jealous by a "no people." (author's translation)

Paul argues that the ingathering of the Gentiles (the "no people") through his mission endeavors will arouse jealousy among the Jews, so that ultimately "all Israel," extended and inclusive of believing Jews and Gentiles, will share in salvation (Rom 10:19—11:26). Clearly Paul reflected deeply on Deuteronomy and on the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 especially. (It has been called "Romans in a nutshell.") He quotes its final doxology, calling on the nations to praise God with his people (Deut 32:43), in his exposition of the multinational nature of the gospel and its implications for the need for crosscultural acceptance and sensitivity between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Rom 15:7-10).²³

The Sinai covenant, then, which provides the backbone for so much of the law and the prophets, has extensive missiological significance. When we seek to read these massive building block texts of the Torah through the lens of a missional hermeneutic, we have to take account of

- the status and role of Israel—as God's covenant priesthood in the midst of the nations
- the central privilege of the presence of God in the midst of his people, constituting their distinctiveness from and their witness to the nations

²³On the full extent of Deuteronomy's influence on Paul's missiology, see J. M. Scott, "Restoration of Israel," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. B. Martin (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press; Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 796-805.

- the anticipated failure of Israel that in the mysterious providence of God would result in opening the door of grace and salvation to the nations

These international and missional dimensions of Israel's covenant at Sinai eventually influenced and shaped the mission of Jesus and Paul in theology and in practice, and continue to have relevance for the church as the new covenant people of God in Christ.

David

The story of Israel rolled on until the time came when the nation demanded a king. After the failure of Saul, a monarchy was eventually established under David. It was not what God had initiated or asked for. But God was not wrong-footed by human decisions, and so he takes this human initiative within Israel, with all its ambiguities, and turns it into the vehicle of his own purpose.

A king in the purposes of God. Since David was to be king over the covenant people, God entered into a particular covenant with him and his successors. This needs to be seen not as a new covenant unrelated to the Sinai covenant but as a particular outworking of it in the context of monarchy. After all, who was the true king? The Sinai covenant had articulated the conviction that the true king of Israel was YHWH himself. This had been the triumphant declaration made on the back of the exodus—that “the LORD will reign / for ever and ever” (Ex 15:18). And for centuries the conviction that YHWH was the true King of Israel had been enough to resist the whole idea of a human king among the tribes of Israel settled in the land of Canaan. Gideon rejected the kingship when invited (Judg 8:22-23), and Abimelech, who seized it, came to an unenviable end (Judg 9). The reign of Saul had ended up hardly any better.

So when David is anointed as “a man after my own heart,”²⁴ it must imply that the reign of David is not to be seen as in any way replacing or usurping the reign of YHWH, but rather as an embodiment of it. David as human king of Israel will carry out the purpose of YHWH, their covenant great King. Thus the primary focus of the covenant with the house of David, as recorded in 2 Samuel 7, is on the role of David and his successors in earthing that rule of YHWH in Israel through these new royal arrangements. The king would rule over the people, but only as the representative of the ultimate rule of YHWH—in a more stable way, though no different in principle, than the leadership of the judges in an

²⁴The phrase does not mean (as it may sound in English) a special favorite of God. Rather since the heart is the seat of the will and intentions in Hebrew, the phrase simply means that David will be the one who will carry out the purposes of God.

earlier era, who had also earthed God's authority among the people.²⁵

The Davidic covenant, then, has a primarily Israel focus. There is however an awareness that, just as Israel itself had a more-than-local significance in the mission of God, so did their king. The universalizing aspects of the Davidic covenant, which are relevant for a missional reading of it, can be seen in two ways: on the one hand, the language of praise that links the Davidic kingship to the kingship of YHWH over all the nations, and on the other hand, the building of the temple as the focus of the worship, initially of Israel but ultimately of the nations. To these two missiologically pregnant themes—kingship and temple—we now turn.

A king for all nations. Only when we link the kingship of David and his successors to the kingship of God can we make sense of texts that envision the reign of David over the nations or even over the earth. Some of the Davidic/Zion psalms also have this note of universality.

Psalm 2:7-9, for example, celebrates the universal rule of the son of David, addressed as the son of God. The language may originally have been coronation hyperbole—that is, an exaggerated affirmation of the worldwide rule of the Davidic king in Jerusalem. But the theological and messianic implications certainly envision the extension of the tiny kingdom of the historical David into the ultimately universal kingdom of “great David’s greater Son,” and the psalm was already being read in a messianic key well before the time of Jesus.

Psalm 72:8-11, 17 declares a similar expectation of the universal reign of the son of David. There is a very clear echo of the Abrahamic covenant in verse 17: “All nations will be blessed through him, / and they will call him blessed.” The Davidic and the Abrahamic covenants are brought into closest connection here. Indeed, it is being affirmed that a king in the line of David will be the means through which God’s promise to bless the nations will be fulfilled. Those who stand to be blessed through Abraham here stand to be blessed through the Davidic king.

This strong connection may well have influenced Matthew’s joint focus on both of these great ancestors in his genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:1. Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham. The Messiah who concludes Matthew’s Gospel by sending his disciples forth in a mission that would universalize the *Sinai* covenant, opens the Gospel (and the New Testament) as the one who em-

²⁵John Goldingay observes a link between the warm initial affirmation of David as a man who “did justice and righteousness” (2 Sam 8:15) and led his whole household and nation in that direction, and the intention of God that this was the very purpose of Abraham’s election—for the sake of the blessing not only of Israel but of all nations (Gen 18:19). Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:555.

bodies the universal blessing of the *Abraham* covenant and the universal kingship of the *Davidic* covenant.

Isaiah 11 pairs up with Isaiah 9:1-7 in promising great things for the people of God under the reign of a coming son of the house of David. What is immediately striking about this chapter, however, is that the endowment of the Spirit of YHWH on this future “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” that is, a descendant of David, will empower him for a role that will extend not only to all nations of the earth but even to all of creation. In the first main song of the chapter, his rule of justice will encompass the earth (v. 4). And in the commentary that follows his banner will summon peoples and nations (vv. 10, 12). Not surprisingly, in the song of praise that concludes this whole section of the book of Isaiah, the good news of such universal importance is indeed to be proclaimed among the nations and to all the world (Is 12:4-5). The missional mood that will resonate so strongly later in the book is already anticipated here in the wake of the prophecies of the worldwide benefits of a future fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

In Isaiah 55:3-5 the Lord declares:

I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
 my faithful love promised to David.
 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander of the peoples.
 Surely you will summon nations you know not,
 and nations that do not know you will hasten to you.

Coming at the climax of a whole section devoted to the encouragement of the exiles, this word links the future of God's people not only to the hope of return from exile (including return to God also) but also to the restoration of the covenant with David. The destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of the Davidic king had seemed to put an end to that covenant, as Psalm 89 laments. Here God not only remembers it, but extends it in two ways. On the one hand, the promise to David will from now on be a covenant with all the people—“with you” (plural). And on the other hand, the future rule of the new David will not be limited to ethnic Israelites but will extend to peoples and nations (plural). This connects, of course, with the universalizing thrust of these prophecies, which included the great vision that ultimately “all flesh,” that is, *all humanity*, will see the glory of the Lord (Is 40:5).

A house of prayer for all nations. Alongside the covenant with the house of David, the same narratives record the building of the temple by David's son, Solomon. as a “house for the LORD.” And with this development comes also the

strong emphasis on Jerusalem as Zion, the city of God. This whole David-temple-Zion nexus of theological traditions is at one level highly centralized and particular. After all, *this* is the place and the sanctuary, where YHWH is to be sought because this is where he has caused his name to dwell. Yet in other respects the temple tradition has a remarkable openness to the rest of the nations and an incipient universality that surfaces in a number of texts.

1 Kings 8:41-43. The prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple invites YHWH to pay attention to the prayers not only of Israelites, but also of foreigners (see pp. 228-30). It is an implicit fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that foreigners will be attracted to come and invoke the God of Israel for blessing. The motivation offered to God for answering such prayers of noncovenant people is expressly missional—namely, that “all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel” (v. 43). The temple, then, that was so centrally connected to the Davidic covenant in the developing faith of Israel from this point on can be the focus for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. It should be the place of blessing for representatives of the nations.

Isaiah 56:1-7. This remarkable word offers a reversal of the situation in which foreigners (to different degrees and for different reasons [Deut 23:1-8]) had been excluded from Israel's holiest place. Not only will God himself bring them to his “holy mountain” (the city of Jerusalem), not only will he give them “joy in my house of prayer” (the temple), but their complete inclusion will be proved by the acceptance of their sacrifices “on my altar.” This universalizing of the efficacy of the temple to include foreigners is immediately confirmed by the announcement “for my house will be called / a house of prayer for all nations” (v. 7).

This was the text that Jesus knew would be fulfilled in the temple of his own person and those whom he gathered to himself, and quoted as he prophetically enacted the destruction of the temple of his own day (Mk 11:17). It was also the promise that was appropriated (consciously or not) by the Ethiopian eunuch, as he found joy in fulfillment of Isaiah 56:7, not when he visited the temple in Jerusalem but when he was introduced to Jesus by Philip in the desert (Acts 8:39).

Great David's greater son. *Luke 1—2.* Matthew picks up the Davidic descent of Jesus the Messiah and connects it with Abraham. But it is Luke who turns this feature into a symphony of Davidic references and allusions in the first two chapters of his Gospel. As is appropriate, the references to David begin with God's promise specifically to Israel. But it is not long before the horizon widens out to include the nations.

Mary is introduced to us as the fiancée of Joseph, “a descendant of David”

(Lk 1:27). Gabriel's word to her specifies that the child she will bear will be the expected messianic king of Israel: "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end" (Lk 1:32-33). The Song of Zechariah celebrates that God is at last keeping his promises to both Abraham and David, and bringing salvation and deliverance once again to his people (Lk 1:69-73). The choir of angels identify Bethlehem as "the town of David" (Lk 2:11, as if the local shepherds didn't know that) and tell them that the good news they bring is "for all people" (Lk 2:10). *Salvation, glory and peace*—key notes in the heavenly harmony of the angels—were all features of the promised new era of the reign of the new David. Finally, Simeon, though he does not mention David, recognizes the full-orbed truth about the infant he holds in his arms. Not only is he "the Lord's Christ" (Lk 2:26), he is (as his name declared) the Lord's salvation, prepared for all people, Gentiles and Israel alike (Lk 2:30-32). So for Luke the universal and missional significance of Jesus the Messiah, and his Abrahamic and Davidic pedigree, belong in the same grammar of divine promise fulfillment.

Acts 15:12-18. In his second volume Luke continues the theme of Davidic fulfillment in two ways. First, in their early preaching both Peter and Paul use Jesus' Davidic descent alongside his resurrection in their argument that he is the promised Messiah (Acts 2:25-36; 13:22-37). Second, at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, called to wrestle theologically and pragmatically with the influx of Gentiles into the church as a result of the successful mission of Paul and others, James chooses a text from Amos that prophesies not only that the nations will come to bear the name of the Lord but also that the "fallen tent" of David will be rebuilt (Amos 9:11-12). The implications of this choice of text are important. It preserves the proper order of the eschatological vision of the Old Testament (which we will study more fully in the chap. 14).

The covenant promises to Israel must be fulfilled. Israel must be redeemed, the Davidic kingdom restored, the Davidic temple rebuilt. Only then could the nations be gathered in. James works the logic backward from the facts on the ground. The nations are clearly being gathered in, and it is manifestly the work of God himself. The only conclusion that could be drawn, therefore, was that in the resurrection of the Messiah, the promised restoration of David's kingdom and rebuilding of the temple had also taken place. But since the Davidic Messiah would be king for all nations, and the Davidic temple would be a house of prayer for all nations, the restoration of these things must now move forward to their appointed purpose—the ingathering of the nations as the subjects of his kingdom and the stones in his temple. The resurrection of Jesus is not just the fulfillment of words of David in the psalms, it is also the restoration of the reign

and temple of David, no longer for ethnic Israel only but for all nations.²⁶

Romans 1:1-5. Romans is Paul's most sustained exposition of his own missional theology. It presents the scriptural basis on which the gospel declares that the nations can be included in the saving work of God along with Israel, while affirming that God has still remained faithful to his promise to Israel. Indeed, the inclusion of the nations is part of what actually constitutes the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel.

In his opening words of introduction, Paul chooses to include Jesus' human descent from David among the points he makes about the fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures.

The gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 1:1-4)

"The gospel he promised beforehand," Paul will go on to show, is utterly universal in its scope, since it was announced first to Abraham and included all nations. That Jesus is the son of David as well as the Son of God must therefore be included in the ingredients of that universality. For it is explicitly in the name of this Jesus, Son of David and Son of God, that Paul has his missionary commission to bring about "the obedience of faith" among the nations in verse 5.

Revelation 5:1-10. A final reference to the Davidic covenant in relation to Jesus comes in John's great vision of the heavenly reality that lies behind or above the present world order in which Christians have to live their lives. Who has the key to the scroll, the meaning of human history in the purposes of God? It is a closed book unless it is unfolded by one with competent authority. "Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, *the Root of David* has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals" (Rev 5:5, emphasis added). This figure is then seen as the Lamb who was slain. So the crucified Jesus is the one who is worthy to open the scroll for the cross of Jesus is the key to all God's plan in history. "For with your blood you

²⁶For a full and rich exposition of the way Luke in Acts clearly identifies the resurrection of Jesus with the eschatological temple, in Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost, in Stephen's speech and in James's speech at the Council of Jerusalem, see Beale, *Temple and Church's Mission*, chap. 6. James quotes Amos 9:11, but his words probably also echo Hosea 3:5 and Jeremiah 12:15-16, with the vision of "Gentiles becoming part of true Israel by means of being built as the true temple. This understanding of Acts 15:14-18 is consistent with several Old Testament prophecies that affirm that Gentiles will come into the divine presence in the temple of the messianic epoch (Ps. 96:7-8; Is. 2:2-3; 25; 56:6-7; Jer. 3:17; Mic. 4:1-2; Zech. 14:16)" (ibid., p. 239).

purchased people for God *from every tribe and language and people and nation*" (Rev 5:9, author's translation).

The Root of David has fulfilled the promise to Abraham. The mission of God is complete.

The New Covenant

The story of Israel rolled on. The history of failure and rebellion that had been anticipated in Deuteronomy became a reality. The people as a whole failed to live by the standards of the Sinai covenant. Successive kings of both Israel and Judah failed to live either by the standards of Sinai or the ideals of Zion. The covenant relationship was strained to breaking point. Indeed some prophetic voices declared that it had indeed been broken, and only an act of God's amazing grace could ever salvage it.

But that was the trademark of YHWH, God of Israel—acts of grace beyond belief and certainly beyond deserving. And so there developed a growing longing for God to act in a new way, to make a fresh start, to inaugurate a renewal of the covenant in such a way that it would not fall prey to the failures of a disobedient people. Only once is this described in the precise terms "a new covenant" (by Jeremiah), but the idea that God's new future would include features of the original covenants, renewed and permanently established, is found across a range of texts.

All of the covenants we have surveyed had dimensions and expectations that looked beyond the boundaries of Israel alone, recognizing that YHWH as the covenant God of Israel was also the sovereign God of all the earth and all nations. It is not surprising, then, that the idea of a new covenant would likewise bring those wider missional hopes into view. Nor is it surprising either that the documents we have received from the earliest Christians came to be collectively called the New Covenant (or Testament). For they read their existing Scriptures in the light of their belief that Jesus was the Messiah and that through him the promised new covenant had been inaugurated, along with mission to the nations as its inescapable corollary.

Prophetic hopes. Jeremiah. The one text that explicitly uses the phrase "a new covenant," Jeremiah 31:31-37, gives no clear indication of its universality, that is, that it will involve or include other nations in its scope.²⁷ The passage comes in a section of Jeremiah known as the Book of Consolation (chaps. 30-33), in which the prophet is absorbed with bringing comfort to the people of Israel

²⁷I offer a fuller classified analysis of all the New Covenant passages in the prophets in Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*.

through the message of their restoration after exile. This should not be taken, however, to imply that Jeremiah had no interest in or awareness of any promise from God in relation to the nations at large. He was, after all, called to be a “prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5)—a role he seems to have agonized over with some seriousness. At least two other texts have the nations in view, with a wider offer of God’s blessing of salvation.

In a quite remarkable small oracle (Jer 12:14-17), the nations around Israel are offered exactly the same hope of restoration and establishment on exactly the same conditions (repentance and true worship) that Jeremiah elsewhere held out to Israel.

As for Israel itself, if only they would truly repent, then not only would the judgment of God be suspended on Israel but the blessing of God would be released. And in striking allusion to Genesis 12:3, that will mean Abrahamic blessing for the rest of the nations (Jer 4:1-2).

Ezekiel. In chapters 34-37 Ezekiel envisions the future restoration and reestablishment of Israel itself in language that has echoes of all the covenants with Noah, David and at Sinai (e.g., Ezek 34:23-31). The whole flavor of Ezekiel’s vision of the future is strongly covenantal.

But did Ezekiel hold out hope for the salvation of *the nations*? Not explicitly, but his silence on the matter should not be used to prove too much. Ezekiel’s passion was that the whole earth should come to know the true identity of God as YHWH. An analysis of Ezekiel’s use of the phrase “then you [or they] will know that I am YHWH,” shows some differentiation between Israel and the nations.

- Israel would come to know YHWH both through judgment and future restoration.
- The nations would come to know YHWH through witnessing God’s acts in and for Israel, and through the experience of their own judgment.

Ezekiel never quite says that the nations will come to know YHWH *through their own future salvation*. It could be said that this is at least implied as a possibility, since “knowing YHWH” is such a feature of the covenant between God and Israel, and is strongly connected with his acts of redemption on their behalf. By analogy, if the nations will come to know YHWH, it could include experiencing salvation as Israel did. One must accept, however, that Ezekiel never explicitly says so.

However, it has been pointed out that, standing as he did at the beginning of the exile, Ezekiel’s overriding concern was *whether there could be any future at all for Israel*. Unless Israel could be brought to repentance and saving knowledge of God, there was no hope for Israel themselves, let alone for the rest of the world. Any hope for the *nations* depended entirely on *Israel* being put right.

So that is the burning concern of Ezekiel in the first searing onslaught of God's judgment in exile. Nothing mattered more than that Israel should repent, return to God and come to know him again—and that would only happen through the fires of judgment.²⁸

Isaiah. The book of Isaiah uses the language of covenant to express future hope in explicitly universalizing ways that include the nations. In Isaiah 42:6 and Isaiah 49:6, the mission of the servant of YHWH is, among other things, to be a "covenant for the people"—a mysterious phrase and something of an exegetical *crux*, but it is surely to be understood through its parallelism with "light for the Gentiles [nations]" (cf. Is 49:6, which further explicates it in terms of YHWH's salvation going "to the ends of the earth").

The language of justice and *torah* in Isaiah 42 is reminiscent of the Sinai covenant, but it is the Davidic covenant that is referred to in Isaiah 55:3-5, and its universalizing tendency is actualized. Even the covenant with Noah is harnessed to the certainty of God's promise of future blessing for his people, in Isaiah 54:7-10.

So we find then that in its Old Testament development, the anticipated new covenant picks up themes from all of the preceding covenants—Noah, Abraham, Sinai and David, and in several places expands them to include the nations within the ultimate scope of God's saving covenantal mission. This eschatological and universalizing development of the covenant trajectory through the Old Testament story is what leads directly to the missionally charged language of fulfillment in the New.

Covenantal "yes" in Christ. "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ," said Paul, in a context in which his own role as a servant of the new covenant is very much in his mind (2 Cor 1:20; cf. chap. 3).

Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, the Word of God made flesh like the rest of the human family, has been sent as the "Yes!" to all God's promises. In Jesus of Nazareth God has granted the descendant of Abraham in whom all nations are to be blessed, the prophet like Moses who surpasses Moses in bringing the world "grace and truth," the son of David whose just rule will never end, the Suffering Servant who has become a covenant bringing together in himself the scattered peoples of the world.²⁹

²⁸I have discussed these dimensions of Ezekiel's message in relation to the nations further in *The Message of Ezekiel*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 35-38, and I owe the point being made here to 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).

²⁹Christopher J. Baker, *Covenant and Liberation: Giving New Heart to God's Endangered Family* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 323-24.

This being so, we might be surprised to find that the New Testament is a bit light on actual covenant vocabulary. It is true that neither Jesus nor Paul mention the word particularly often (though in highly significant ways when they do). But this is simply because they take the covenantal story for granted as the baseline for all their thinking.

I must emphasize again the underlying story that binds all the Old Testament covenant articulations together. Necessarily, we have had to pick our way through a selection of texts in each case. But binding them all together is the grand narrative of God's mission, ever since Abraham, to bring blessing to the nations through this people whom he has called to be his special possession. This is not just any story, it is *the* story, providing Israelites with their fundamental worldview and providing Christians also with theirs. For this is the God whom we worship in Jesus. This is the people to whom we belong through faith in Jesus. And this is the story of which Jesus is the climax and which he will eventually bring to its grand finale. And covenant runs through this story like a core nerve.

So for Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, the covenant was just as crucial to the way they thought of God's purpose for Israel as the certainty that Israel's God was the only living and true God and that Israel was God's elect. So, whether explicitly mentioned or not, we find covenantal realities in all the great fulfillment themes. And especially we find it in the extension of covenant membership to the nations, which was the underlying purpose of the missionary work of the church.

The most memorable (literally) usage of the term "new covenant," of course, is Christ's definitive use of it on the occasion of his final Passover meal with his disciples just before his crucifixion. In that highly charged moment that celebrated the exodus and the subsequent establishing of the covenant with Israel at Sinai, Jesus takes the fourth cup of the meal and declares it to be "the cup of the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for many." The essential words, with minor variations are found in our earliest record, in 1 Corinthians 11:25, and in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20). The phrase "for many" is usually taken to connect the action in Jesus' mind with Isaiah 53:11 and the vicarious suffering of God's servant on behalf of all who would benefit from his death.

Mission and the extension of the covenant to the nations. Paul sees the gospel story as playing out the covenantal script anticipated in the later chapters of Deuteronomy. Paul was particularly keen to insist that the Gentiles who were coming to Christ were coming into a status of total inclusion within the covenant. Or to put it the other way round, the covenant between God and Israel was being extended in such a way that Israel itself is now redefined to include

Gentiles in Christ. We have already seen how he harangues the Galatians to recognize that if they are *in Christ*, then they are *in Abraham* and heirs of that covenant promise. In fact, it is *only* when Gentiles like them *are* included that the Abrahamic promise is fulfilled at all. God's promise to Abraham remains unfulfilled unless the nations are blessed along with Abraham and Israel.

The supreme exposition of the covenantal inclusion of the Gentiles is Ephesians 2:11-22. In a classic contrast, Paul portrays the status of the nations outside Israel prior to the gospel; it is sheer, bleak, covenant exclusion: "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). Then, following his explanation of the reconciling work of Christ on the cross, Paul piles on the covenantal imagery again, from verse 19. These former covenant outsiders are now no longer foreigners and aliens (technical terms in Old Testament law) but full members of God's *people* and God's *household*. They do not just have access to the presence of God, they actually constitute the *temple*, the very *dwelling place* of God. All of this is top-drawer covenant imagery. And all of it is now the reality for these Gentiles who have been brought in through the instrumentality of Paul's mission.

Mission extends the boundaries of covenant membership wherever the gospel is effectively preached. The Great Commission is the command of the new covenant. It is Matthew, of course, who gives us, as the climax of his Gospel, what has come to be known as the Great Commission. What is not so often noticed is how thoroughly covenantal and indeed Deuteronomic is the form and content of Matthew's record at this point.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, as you go, disciple all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And look, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt 28:18-20, author's translation)

Among the key elements of the Old Testament covenant form were

- the self-introduction of God as the great King with all authority (often shortened simply to "I am YHWH")
- the imperative demands of the covenant relationship—that is, the instructions given by the covenant Lord
- promises of blessing

We can see how all three of these covenantal elements are contained in the words of Jesus.

First, he identifies himself as the one who now possesses all divine authority—he is the covenant Lord.

Second, he gives the disciples (who now, appropriately, are also worshipers [v. 17]) a systematic mandate for their covenant obedience.

Third, he concludes with the promise of his own permanent presence among them—something explicitly promised as the covenantal blessing *par excellence*.³⁰

The Great Commission is nothing less than a universalized covenant proclamation. It could even be regarded as the promulgation of the new covenant by the *risen* Jesus, just as his words at the Last Supper were the institution of the new covenant in relation to his *death*.

Even the language of the Great Commission is almost pure Deuteronomy. The people of Israel were told to take to heart that “the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (Deut 4:39). That was the supreme reason for the exclusive covenant loyalty that Israel must give to YHWH alone. The risen Jesus calmly assumes that position of *cosmic identity and authority*. What had been affirmed of YHWH is now claimed by *Jesus*.

And the emphasis on *obedience*, implicit in the command to make disciples, which is Deuteronomic enough in itself, is crystal clear in the phrase “to observe everything that I have commanded you”—the constant refrain of the whole book of Deuteronomy.

And even Christ's *promise* to be with his disciples, is an echo of the promise made to Joshua by both Moses and God himself that he would be with him forever (Deut 31:8, 23; cf. Josh 1:5). The covenant presence of God among his people in the Old Testament becomes the promised presence of Jesus among his disciples as they carry out the mission he lays on them. “The [Old Testament] protection offered by Yahweh to his people or to his messengers in the past is now promised by Jesus, the universal savior, to the new people of this universal covenant.”³¹

Mission then, as articulated in the Great Commission, is the reflex of the new covenant. Mission is an unavoidable imperative founded on the *covenantal lordship* of Christ our King. Its task is to produce self-replicating communities of *covenantal obedience* to Christ among the nations. And it is sustained by the *covenantal promise* of the perduring presence of Christ among his followers.

Mission accomplished as the climax of the covenant. But we cannot stop short of the climactic vision of the whole Scripture, the book of Revelation. Revelation is gloriously covenantal and presents the presence of God among his peo-

³⁰Cf. Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant*, pp. 134-35.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 139.

ple as the crowning achievement of God's cosmic redemptive mission. Revelation 21—22, indeed, combines imagery from all the covenants of the Scriptures.

Noah is there in the vision of a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth after judgment. Abraham is there in the ingathering and blessing of all nations from every tongue and language. Moses is there in the covenantal assertion that "they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God," and "the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them." David is there in the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and in the identity of Jesus as the Lion of Judah and Root of David. And the New Covenant is there in the fact that all of this will be accomplished by the blood of the Lamb who was slain.

This is the omega point of the long sweep of covenantal history through the Bible. The covenants proclaim the mission of God as his committed promise to the nations and the whole of creation. The book of Revelation is the covenantal declaration "Mission accomplished."

We may never know for sure what Scriptures Jesus expounded to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus or which passages he may have had particularly in mind when he told the rest of the disciples on the same evening that "this is what is written" (Lk 24:45-48). We can be fairly confident, however, that, having explicitly identified his own death with the new covenant (Lk 22:20), the covenants we have surveyed above would have been at least part of the path he trod through the Scriptures. The covenants thus form an essential part of that Christian reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, which, as Jesus pointed out, must be both *messianic* (because they all lead ultimately to Christ) and *missiological* (because they lead to repentance and forgiveness being preached in the name of Christ to all nations). The mission of God is as integral to the sequence of the covenants as they are to the overarching grand narrative of the whole Bible.

The Life of God's Missional People

We have traveled a long way with Israel in the last five chapters. We have traced the story of Israel's God in his actions of election, redemption and covenant on behalf of his people Israel, exploring how each is a dimension of the great mission of the God of the Bible to bring blessing to all nations. In each case we have also explored how these core worldview themes are picked up in the New Testament and form the template for understanding the identity and mission of the church as the people of the same God.

At various points along the way, we have seen hints of the necessity of Israel's *ethical response*. God's mission is to bless all nations through this people whom he has chosen, redeemed and bound to himself in covenant relationship. But that divine purpose calls for human response. All three pillars of Israel's faith and identity (their election, redemption, and covenant) are connected to God's mission. The ethical challenge to God's people is, first, to recognize the mission of God that provides the heartbeat of their very existence and, then, to respond in ways that express and facilitate it rather than deny and hinder it.

In this chapter we will bind together the diverse ethical hints that we have observed so far, consolidating them around certain key texts that give sharp focus to each of the three major themes. Three texts in particular, which are acknowledged as having a programmatic status in their own contexts, will command our attention for the wider light they shed on ethics and mission: Genesis 18, Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4.

The common opinion that the Bible is a moral code book for Christians falls far short, of course, of the full reality of what the Bible is and does. The Bible is essentially the story of God, the earth and humanity; it is the story of what has gone wrong, what God has done to put it right, and what the future holds under the sovereign plan of God. Nevertheless, within that grand narrative,

moral teaching does have a vital place. The Bible's story is the story of the mission of God. The Bible's demand is for the appropriate response from human beings. God's mission calls for and includes human response. And our mission certainly includes the ethical dimensions of that response.

The people of God in both testaments are called to be a light to the nations. But there can be no light to the nations that is not shining already in transformed lives of a holy people. So what we aim to show in this chapter is that the ethical teaching of the Bible can (indeed should) be read from a missiological angle, that is with the missiological hermeneutic that is the burden of this whole book.

What we will observe beyond doubt, I trust, is that there can be no biblical mission without biblical ethics.

Missional Ethics and Election—Genesis 18

In chapter six we looked in depth at God's election of Abraham, with its "bottom line" promise of blessing to the nations. We observed how the primary purpose of election is contained in the combination of promise and command, "you will be a blessing" (or "be a blessing"). With these words God launched the history of redemptive blessing in the world. But we also saw how Genesis stresses the response of Abraham in faith and obedience. Abraham's own obedience (highlighted as the reason why God will fulfill his promise to bless all nations [Gen 22:16-18]) was to be the model for the continuing education of his descendants from generation to generation. They too must walk in the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice so that God can accomplish the missional purpose of Abraham's election. "The Abrahamic covenant is a moral agenda for God's people as well as a mission statement by God" (see p. 221).

The text that most clearly articulates this connection is Genesis 18:18-19, and to this we now turn.

Abraham will indeed become a great and mighty nation, and all nations on earth will find blessing through him. For I have known (chosen) him *for the purpose that* he will teach his sons and his household after him so they will keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice, *for the purpose that* YHWH will bring about for Abraham what he has promised to him. (Gen 18:18-19, author's translation)

This little divine soliloquy comes in the middle of the narrative of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah that comprises Genesis 18—19. So this self-reminder of God's universal promise of blessing is actually nested within the story of one particularly notorious instance of God's historical judgment. We need to pay attention first of all to that surrounding context, since, like the story of the tower of Babel, it both stands in stark contrast to God's words to

Abraham and also shows us the reason why those redemptive words were so necessary.

Sodom: A model of our world. Sodom represents the way of the fallen world. It stands in Scripture as a proverbial prototype of human wickedness and of the judgment of God that ultimately falls upon evildoers. A survey of some texts that refer to Sodom will demonstrate this.

Starting in this chapter, we hear the “outcry” (*zē‘āqâ*) that comes up to God from Sodom.

Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.” (Gen 18:20-21)

zē‘āqâ, or *šē‘āqâ*, is a technical word for the cry of pain or the cry for help from those who are being oppressed or violated.¹ We saw in chapter eight that it is the word used for Israelites crying out under their slavery in Egypt (p. 272). Psalmists use it when appealing to God to hear their cry against unjust treatment (e.g., Ps 34:17). Most graphically of all, it is the scream for help by a woman being raped (Deut 22:24, 27). As early as Genesis 13:13 we were told that “the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD.” Here that sin is identified as oppression, for that is what the word “outcry” immediately indicates. Some people in or near Sodom were suffering to such an extent that they were crying out against its oppression and cruelty.

In Genesis 19 we read further of the hostile, perverted and violent sexual immorality that characterized “all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old” (Gen 19:4).

In Deuteronomy 29:23 the future fate of Israel under God’s anger and judgment for their idolatry is compared to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, which suggests that part of the sin of the twin cities was unbridled idolatry, along with their social evils (cf. Lam 4:6).

Isaiah portrays the Jerusalem of his own day in the colors of Sodom and Gomorrah when condemning it for its bloodshed, corruption and injustice (Is 1:9-23). And he further portrays the future judgment of God against Babylon (an-

¹For a full and detailed discussion of this word, including its use in the Psalms and Prophets, see Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). Boyce gives a whole chapter (chap. 3) to the use of this term in the legal setting of the “cry for help” addressed to the authorities by the needy. It certainly sharpens our understanding of Gen 18:20 if what God heard from Sodom was not just “an outcry” but specifically “a cry for help” addressed to himself as the ultimate “Judge of all the earth.” In this case, God’s intervention to destroy the cities would be seen as breaking their power over the poor and oppressed in the surrounding area—an act of biblical justice.

other prototypical city) for its pride as a replay of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Is 13:19-20).

Ezekiel even more caustically compares Judah unfavorably with Sodom, describing Sodom's sin as arrogance, affluence and callousness to the needy. They were overproud, overfed and underconcerned—a very modern sounding list of accusations (Ezek 16:48-50).

So, from the wider Old Testament witness, it is clear that Sodom was used as a paradigm—a model of human society at its worst and of the inevitable and comprehensive judgment of God on such wickedness. It was a place filled with oppression, cruelty, violence, perverted sexuality, idolatry, pride, greedy consumption and void of compassion or care for the needy.

Philip Esler suggests that this catalog of the vice and evil that characterized Sodom shaped the Jewish mind in relation to sin and judgment, and, as such, is reflected in Paul's portrayal of human wickedness in Romans 1:18-32. Though Paul does not name Sodom, his own list of human sin reflects all of the scriptural items in the sin of Sodom. Significantly, Paul begins his list with the statement "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against" all such behavior, and ends it with the statement that "those who do such things deserve death." It was indeed from heaven that death rained in fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24).² It is a point worth remembering that when Paul spoke of his mission of apostleship to the nations, it was to nations that he saw typified in Sodom. To bring about "the obedience of faith" among a world of humanity that could be soberly described in those terms could be nothing short of the miraculous power of God's grace operating in the gospel. It still is.

Abraham: A model of God's mission. Sodom then stands as a model of the world under judgment. Yet it was also part of the world that was the context of Abraham's calling and residence. Inasmuch as Sodom was in the land to which Abraham was commanded to go, it was, in a sense, the context of his mission. There is a certain irony in the biblical narrative that records Abraham being called out of the land of Babel, not into some heavenly paradise but into the land of Sodom. Whatever else the story of redemption will be, it is not a story of escapism.

So it is in this context of the wickedness of Sodom, the investigation being conducted by God with his two angels and the likelihood of divine judgment upon the cities of the plain, that the conversations of Genesis 18 are set. God's soliloquy in verse 18 is a recapitulation of the original covenant promise. This

²Philip E. Esler, "The Sodom Tradition in Romans 1:18-32," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 (2004): 4-16.

is the missional goal that sheds light on God's renewed promise to Abraham and Sarah of a son in the first half of the chapter (Gen 18:10, 14). God, on his way to act in judgment on a particular evil society, stops to remind himself of his ultimate purpose of blessing all nations. It is almost as if God cannot do the one (judgment) without setting it in the context of the other (redemption). The immediate particular necessity is investigation and judgment. The ultimate universal goal is (as it always was) blessing.

So then, God stops for a meal with Abraham and Sarah. He need not have done so, any more than, strictly speaking, he needed to "go down" to discover what was going on in Sodom (though the language is identical to his inspection of the tower of Babel). The reason was that God saw in this elderly couple camped on the hills above the cities of the plain the key to his whole missional purpose for history and humanity. The story is a further reminder to us (just as it is presented as a reminder by God to himself [vv. 17-19]) of the centrality of Abraham in the biblical theology of the mission of God.

How Abraham responds to being taken into God's confidence in this way is likewise significant. He turns to intercession (Gen 18:22-33).

This dialogue is sometimes portrayed as a case of Middle Eastern haggling—the dynamics and language being that of the bazaar. The assumption is that God is the harsh judge from whom Abraham eventually extracts, by a process of downward bidding, a greater leniency. Or it has even been taken as Abraham beginning his teaching career (see v. 19) on YHWH himself, by instructing him in a more discriminating way to be judge of all the earth (i.e., by not destroying the righteous with the wicked).³ Nathan Macdonald however has shown that a "bargaining" interpretation does not fit the conversation at all.⁴ Rather, if the image of the bazaar is implied at all, it is subverted. For Abraham discovers YHWH to be far more accommodating than he probably expected.

If one imagines the metaphorical intention is Abraham's attempt to "buy" the salvation of the city for the lowest possible "price" in terms of the numbers of righteous who might be in it, then the "bargaining" goes in the reverse direction to what might be expected. It is Abraham who makes the initial "bid" that the whole city should be spared if fifty righteous people could be found there. Perhaps to his surprise, this is accepted without quibble. Nor is there any counter-proposal. If this actually were a normal bargaining encounter, we should expect a divine reply along the lines of "No, I couldn't do it the sake of just fifty; there

³Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 168.

⁴Nathan MacDonald, "Listening to Abraham—Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004): 25-43.

would have to be at least a hundred.” There would then be successive rapprochements, leading to some agreed figure in between. On the contrary, however, each *reduction* hesitatingly proposed by Abraham is met with an unhesitating acceptance by God, until the process mysteriously stops at ten. Abraham is learning even as he is interceding. The God he is dealing with, the God who has taken him into his confidence for this very purpose, is prepared to be far more merciful than Abraham probably first hoped for. And this God will certainly not fail to distinguish the righteous from the wicked in his judgment.

In the end the narrative tells us that not even ten righteous people could be found there. As Goldingay comments, “Pity the city that lacks even ten innocent people, as Sodom does: All its men gather at Lot’s door—indeed the whole people, to the last person (Gen. 19:4).”⁵ So the judgment falls.

Abraham’s intercession, however, did not entirely fail. The terms on which God would have spared the whole city had not been met. But Abraham’s *first* request, that God should not “sweep away the righteous with the wicked” (Gen 18:23) was indeed granted. Lot and his daughters were rescued from the cataclysm. And, we may presume, those who had cried out against Sodom and Gomorrah (possibly meaning the villages in surrounding lands that were being oppressed by them) were delivered through the destruction of the wicked cities.

Abraham here assumes a role that will later be carried to greater depths by Moses (Ex 32—34; Num 14; Deut 9) and to heaven itself by Christ—that of prophetic and priestly intercessor. Furthermore, it is yet another example of the role of Abraham as an instrument of blessing to the nations—even if in this case the cities in question had sinned themselves beyond the possibility of blessing or reprieve. Astonishing as it may seem, Sodom and Gomorrah had Abraham praying for them and pleading for them to be spared the judgment of God—a very different response to the one displayed by Jonah, or (one has to add) by many Christians as they contemplate the wickedness of the world around them. “If we listen to YHWH, we learn that Abraham’s exchange with YHWH teaches the kind of response expected from YHWH’s elect so that the divine blessing may be mediated to the nations (12:1-3).”⁶ That is to say, we learn the missional significance of intercessory prayer.

“The way of the LORD”: A model for God’s people. Returning to the key central verse, Genesis 18:19, we find its ethical agenda connected on the one side to Abraham’s election and on the other side to God’s mission. We need to

⁵Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 228.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 43.

examine first the specific ethical content of the phrases “the way of the LORD” and “doing righteousness and justice.” Then we will take note of the clear missional logic of the structure and theology of the verse.

The ethical content. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher, specifically a teacher of the way of the LORD and a teacher of righteousness and justice. This ethical pedagogy will start with his children and then pass on to “his household after him,” which presumes the transmission of the teaching down through the generations. Already Abraham is anticipating the role of Moses as teacher, just as we have seen that he anticipates Moses as an interceding prophet. Two phrases summarize the content of the Abrahamic family curriculum:

1. “The way of the LORD.” The expression “keeping the way of the LORD,” or “walking in the way of the LORD,” was a favorite metaphor used in the Old Testament to describe a particular aspect of Israel’s ethics. A contrast is implied: that is, walking in YHWH’s way, as distinct from the ways of other gods or of other nations or one’s own way or the way of sinners. Here, the contrast is clearly between the way of YHWH and the way of *Sodom* that immediately follows. As a metaphor, “walking in the way of the LORD” seems to have two possible pictures in mind.

One is that of following someone else on a path, watching their footsteps and following along carefully in the way they are going. In that sense, the metaphor suggests the imitation of God: you observe how God acts and try to follow suit. “O let me see thy footprints and in them plant my own,” as the hymn says about following Jesus.⁷

Such imagery implies that Israel was destined to travel on a journey in which God was to lead the way as a guide and example for the people to follow. It also suggests that the moral requirements demanded by God were those that he himself had evinced in an exemplary manner in his dealings with his people. By mirroring the divine activity, the people would become a visible exemplar to the nations as to the nature and character of the God whom they worshiped (Deut 4:5-8).⁸

The other picture is of setting off on a path following the instructions that

⁷John F. Bode, “O Jesus, I Have Promised” (1868).

⁸Eryl W. Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways: The Concept of Imitatio Dei in the Old Testament,” in *True Wisdom*, ed. Edward Ball (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 103. Interestingly, Davies touches here on the same aspect of Israel’s missional significance that we are concerned to elucidate. The ethical quality of Israel’s life was part of their “witness” to the nations by being a reflection of Yahweh in the midst of the nations. Cf. also, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996), pp. 11-14, where this ethical aspect of Israel’s mission is discussed, and the section “Missional Ethics and Covenant” in this book (see pp. 375-87).

someone has given you, perhaps a sketch map (if that is not too anachronistic for ancient Israel) or a set of directions to make sure you stay on the right path and do not wander off on wrong paths that may turn out to be dead ends or dangerous. According to Cyril Rodd, this second image fits much better with the use of the metaphor in the Old Testament, since the expression “walking in the way (or ways) of the LORD” is most commonly linked to obeying God’s commands, not to imitating God himself. The way of the Lord, according to Rodd, is simply another expression signifying God’s law or commands, his instruction kit for life’s journey. Rodd is undoubtedly correct in his analysis of the predominant use of the metaphor, but I think he too rigidly rules out the concept of the imitation of God from the expression.⁹ The commands of God are not autonomous or arbitrary rules; they are frequently related to the character or values or desires of God. So to obey God’s commands is to reflect God in human life. Obedience to the law of God and reflection of the character of God are not mutually exclusive categories: the one is an expression of the other.

One of the clearest examples of this dynamic at work is Deuteronomy 10:12-19. It begins with a rhetorical flourish, rather like Micah 6:8, summarizing the whole law in a single chord of five notes: fear, walk, love, serve and obey.

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, *to walk in all his ways*, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you this day for your own good? (Deut 10:12-13, emphasis added)

And what are the ways of YHWH in which Israel is to walk? The answer is given first in broad terms. His was the way of condescending love in choosing Abraham and his descendants to be the special vehicle of his blessing.

To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants. (Deut 10:14-15)

That required a response of love and humility in return: “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Deut 10:16). But what *specifically* are the “ways” of YHWH? At last the passage gets down to detail.

⁹Cyril Rodd provides a very helpful survey of the usage of the metaphor “walking with, after, or before” Yahweh or other gods in *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 330-33.

[He] shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. *And you are to love those who are aliens*, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19, emphasis added)

To walk in the way of the Lord, then, means (among other things) doing for others what God wishes to have done for them, or more particularly, doing for others what (in Israel's case) God has already done for you (in their experience of his deliverance from alien status in Egypt and provision of food and clothing in the wilderness).

Returning then to our main text, Genesis 18:19, a first-time reader of this whole narrative will hear the phrase "the way of YHWH" as a strong contrast to the ways of the cities, whose wickedness is raising the outcry God plans to investigate. The more experienced reader familiar with the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures will hear the phrase as a summary of the whole rich panorama of Old Testament ethics modeled on the character and action of YHWH.

2. Doing righteousness and justice. *Righteousness* and *justice* would also come in the top five of the Old Testament's ethical vocabulary. Each of them individually, in various verbal, adjectival and noun forms, occurs hundreds of times.

The first is the root *šdq*, which is found in two common noun forms, *sedeq* and *šēdāqâ*. They are usually translated "righteousness" in English Bibles, but that rather religious-flavored word does not convey the full range of meaning that the words had in Hebrew. The root meaning is probably "straight": something that is fixed and fully what it should be. So it can mean a norm—something by which other things are measured, a standard. It is used literally of actual objects when they are or do what they are supposed to: for example, accurate weights and measures are "measures of *sedeq*" (Lev 19:36; Deut 25:15). Safe paths for sheep are "paths of *sedeq*" (Ps 23:3). So it comes to mean rightness, that which is at it ought to be, that which matches up to the standard.

When applied to human actions and relationships, it speaks of conformity to what is right or expected—not in some abstract or absolute generic way but according to the demands of the particular relationship or the nature of the specific situation. *Sedeq/šēdāqâ* are in fact highly relational words. So much so that Hemchand Gossai includes a whole section on "relationship" as his definition of the term.

In order for an individual to be *šaddiq* [righteous], it means that of necessity he or she must exist and live in a manner which allows him or her to respond correctly to the values of the relationship; [which may include relationships of spouse, parent, judge, worker, friend, etc.]. . . . In essence then *šdq* is not simply an objective

norm which is present within society, and which must be kept, but rather it is a concept which derives its meaning from the relationship in which it finds itself. So we are able to say that right judging, right governing, right worshiping and gracious activity are all covenantal and righteous, despite their diversity.¹⁰

The second is the root *špt*, which has to do with judicial activity at every level. A common verb and noun are derived from it. The verb *šāpaṭ* refers to legal action over a wide range. It can mean to act as a lawgiver, to act as a judge by arbitrating between parties in a dispute, to pronounce judgment by declaring who is guilty and who is innocent respectively, to execute judgment in carrying out the legal consequences of such a verdict. In the widest sense it means “to put things right,” to intervene in a situation that is wrong, oppressive or out of control and to fix it.

The derived noun *mišpāt* can describe the whole process of litigation (a case) or its end result (the verdict and its execution). It can mean a legal ordinance, usually a case law based on past precedents. Exodus 21—23, known as the Covenant Code, or Book of the Covenant, is called in Hebrew, simply, the *mišpāṭim*. It can also be used in a more personal sense as one’s legal right, the cause or case one is bringing as a plaintiff before the elders. The frequent expression “the *mišpāt* of the orphan and widow” means their rightful case against those who would exploit them. It is from this last sense in particular that *mišpāt* comes to have the wider sense of “justice” in the somewhat active sense, whereas *šedeq/šēdāqā* has a more static flavor.¹¹ In the broadest terms (and recognizing that there is a great deal of overlap and interchangeability between the words) *mišpāt* is what needs to be done in a given situation if people and circumstances are to be restored to conformity with *šedeq/šēdāqā*. *Mišpāt* is a qualitative set of actions—something you do.¹² *Šedeq/šēdāqā* is a qualitative state of affairs—something you aim to achieve.

Here in Genesis 18:19 the two words are paired, as they frequently are, to form a comprehensive phrase. Found together like this as a couplet (either “righteousness and justice” or “justice and righteousness”), they form what is technically called a “hendiadys”—that is, a single complex idea expressed

¹⁰Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets*, American University Studies, Series 7, Theology and Religion (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 141:55–56.

¹¹On *mišpāt*, see *ibid.*, chap. 3.

¹²As it is frequently used in biblical texts, justice is a call for action more than it is a principle of evaluation. Justice as an appeal for a response means *taking upon oneself the cause of those who are weak in their own defense* [cf. Is. 58:6 Jb. 29:16; Jer. 21:12].” Stephen Charles Mott, *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 79.

through the use of two words.¹³ Possibly the nearest English expression to the double word phrase would be “social justice.” Even that phrase, however, is somewhat too abstract for the dynamic nature of this pair of Hebrew words. For, as John Goldingay points out, the Hebrew words are concrete nouns, unlike the English abstract nouns used to translate them. That is, righteousness and justice are actual things that you do, not concepts you reflect on.¹⁴

Abraham, then, was to set in motion a process of ethical instruction in the way of the Lord and the doing of righteousness and justice. But how would he himself come to learn what he was supposed to teach? The immediately following narrative is the first lesson. Our tendency is to focus on the end of the story—the fiery judgment on the sinful cities. But actually the very first point that YHWH himself draws to Abraham's attention is his concern about the suffering of the oppressed in the region at the hands of these cities. In the careful account of the conversation, Genesis 18:17-19 are soliloquy, that is, God speaking to himself. At verse 20 God speaks again to Abraham, and the first word in what he says is *zē'āqā*—“cry for help.” The trigger for God's investigation and subsequent action is not only the appalling sin of Sodom but the protests and cries of their victims. This is an exact anticipation of what motivated God in the early chapters of Exodus. In fact this incident in Genesis is highly programmatic in the way it defines God's character, actions and requirements. The way of the Lord, which Abraham is about to witness and then to teach is to do righteousness and justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor. In this too Abraham is the forerunner of Moses, who learned the same lesson in the ways of the Lord, turned it into intercession (again like Abraham), and taught it to Israel (Ex 33:13, 19; 34:6-7), who then turned it into worship:

The LORD works *righteousness*
and *justice* for all the oppressed.

He made known *his ways* to Moses,
his deeds to the people of Israel. (Ps 103:6-7, emphasis added)

The missional logic. Returning again to our key text, we must also give attention to its grammatical structure and the logic expressed thereby. It is a compact

¹³Other examples of hendiadys in English include “law and order,” “health and safety,” “board and lodging.” Each word in a hendiadys has its own distinct meaning, but when put together in a commonly used phrase, they express a single idea or set of circumstances.

¹⁴John Goldingay, “Justice and Salvation for Israel and Canaan,” in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, ed. Wonil Kim et al. (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 169-87.

statement, in which syntax and theology are closely intertwined with powerful ethical and missiological impact.

Genesis 18:19 falls into three clauses, joined by two expressions of purpose. It opens with God's affirmation of the election of Abraham: "I have known him"—which is frequently used for God choosing to bring a person or people into intimate relationship with himself. God then states the ethical purpose of his election: "for the purpose that he will command/teach his children and household after him to keep the way of YHWH by doing righteousness and justice."¹⁵ This in turn is followed by another purpose clause referring to God's mission to bless the nations (which had just been mentioned in v. 18): "for the purpose that YHWH may bring about for Abraham what he has spoken/promised to him."

This one verse thus binds together *election*, *ethics* and *mission* into a single syntactical and theological sequence located in the will, action and desire of God. It is fundamentally a missional declaration, explaining election and incorporating ethics.

What is most noteworthy in relation to the theme of this section is the way *ethics stands as the mid-term between election and mission*, as the purpose of the former and the basis for the latter. That is, God's election of Abraham is intended to produce a community committed to ethical reflection of God's character. And God's mission of blessing the nations is predicated on such a community actually existing. This is an extension of the link between Abraham's election for blessing others, and Abraham's own *personal* obedience to God. Both Genesis 22:18 and Genesis 26:4-5 make that link, connecting God's intention to bless the nations to Abraham's tested obedience, which the latter text articulates in primary ethical categories. The obedience of Abraham is to be the model for his descendants so that the mission of Abraham can be fulfilled. Now that personal obedience is to be passed on by teaching to his whole community.

One can approach the missional logic of Genesis 18:19 from either end of the verse. Either way, ethics stands in the middle.

- From the end:

What is God's ultimate mission?

To bring about the blessing of the nations, as he promised Abraham (mission).

¹⁵The expression of purpose is emphatic since the clauses are not merely joined (as they might easily be in Hebrew) by the ubiquitous conjunction *wē* but by the purposive conjunction *lēma'an*.

- *How will that be achieved?*

By the existence in the world of a community that will be taught to live according to the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice (ethics).

But how will such a community come into existence?

Because God chose Abraham to be its founding father (election).

- From the beginning:

Who is Abraham?

The one whom God has chosen and come to know in personal friendship (election).

Why did God choose Abraham?

To initiate a people who would be committed to the way of the Lord and his righteousness and justice, in a world going the way of Sodom (ethics).

For what purpose should the people of Abraham live according to that high ethical standard?

So that God can fulfill his mission of bringing blessing to the nations (mission).

This pregnant verse, then, injects another dimension into the link between missiology and ecclesiology. Already we have seen in chapters six and seven how important it is to recognize the missional reason for the very existence of the church as the people of God. We cannot speak biblically of the doctrine of election without insisting that it was never an end in itself but a means to the greater end of the ingathering of the nations. Election must be seen as missiological, not merely soteriological.

Now we see more clearly that this *ecclesiological* link is also an *ethical* one. The community God seeks for the sake of his mission is to be a community shaped by his own ethical character, with specific attention to righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice. Only such a community can be a blessing to the nations.

According to Genesis 18:19, *the ethical quality of life of the people of God is the vital link between their calling and their mission*. God's intention to bless the nations is inseparable from God's ethical demand on the people he has created to be the agent of that blessing.

There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics.

Missional Ethics and Redemption—Exodus 19

We turn from one major programmatic text (Gen 18) to another, Exodus 19:4-6.

You yourselves have seen what I have done to Egypt,
and I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to myself.

Now then, if you really obey my voice and keep my covenant,

you will be for me */li/* a special personal possession
 among all the peoples;
 for to me */li/* belongs the whole earth
 But you, you will be for me */li/* a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.
 (Ex 19:4-6, author's translation)

We have already had occasion to sample the rich content of this text twice. In chapter seven (pp. 224-25) we considered it in relation to the universality and particularity that are both intrinsic to the Abrahamic covenant and the calling of Israel. Then in chapter ten (pp. 329-33) we explored the theme of Israel's priesthood among the nations, with its bidirectional dynamic of bringing the knowledge and law of God to the nations and bringing the nations to God in covenant inclusion and blessing.

Now we need to pick up the other phrase in Israel's God-given identity: "a holy nation." Holiness is intrinsic to priesthood. For Israel to exercise the role of YHWH's priests in the midst of the nations required that they be holy. And holiness was far from merely ritual. It implied a comprehensive ethical agenda. First of all, however, it will be helpful to recall some essential points in the context of the text as a whole. For the context here is crucial for a proper perspective on all biblical ethics and mission. These are things we have noticed before, but they are central enough to bear brief summarizing repetition here.

God's redemptive initiative. "You yourselves have seen what I have done" (Ex 19:4). This reminder points to the preceding eighteen chapters of the book of Exodus, the great narrative of the God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It was a matter of historical fact and recent memory. Only three months ago they had been suffering genocidal oppression. Now they were liberated. "And I did it," says God, "and carried you here to myself." Before anything is said about what Israel has to do, God points to what he has already done.

The initiative of God's redeeming grace is the prior reality on which all that follows will be founded—including the giving of the law, the making of the covenant, building of the tabernacle and moving forward to the Promised Land. The life they now live, they live by the grace of God. The life they will be required to live must flow from the same starting point. Of course there is an ethical imperative in these verses—to obey God's voice and keep God's covenant. But it is expressed as a condition, *not of gaining God's redemption* (for that has already happened) *but of fulfilling the mission their identity lays on them*. Identity and obedience flow from grace.

Biblical ethics then must be seen as response to biblical redemption. Any other foundation leads to pride, legalism or despair. And since we have now

seen how closely Israel's ethical agenda is connected to God's missional investment in their existence, we must place biblical mission on the same foundation. Whatever missional calling we may have flows from the grace of God in our own lives and the grace of his plans for the future, for us and for the world. Mission as a dimension of our obedience also flows from grace—the grace of redemption accomplished and the grace of God's future purposes.

God's universal ownership. “Out of all the nations . . . the whole earth is mine” (Ex 19:5). With these phrases at its core, our text avoids any narrow exclusivity in God's relationship with or intentions for Israel. On the contrary, it affirms the universality of God's ownership of the whole earth and interest in all nations. But in the same breath it affirms the particularity of Israel's unique identity as YHWH's treasured personal possession, as his priestly kingdom and holy nation.

The effect of this double affirmation is that Israel is going to live on a very open stage. There will be nothing cloistered or closeted about Israel's existence or history. For good or ill (as the narratives and prophets will show), Israel was visible to the nations, and in that posture they could be either a credit or a disgrace to YHWH their God. Here, however, at the start of that historical journey in the midst of the nations, God's desire is that they should live consistently with their status as his treasured possession, in priestly and holy conduct.

Biblical ethics then, from this text, cannot be a matter of cosy esoteric behavior of a cloistered in-group accountable only to itself. The life of God's people is always turned outward to the watching nations, as priests are always turned toward their people as well as toward God. Shaping the life of his own particular people in the world is part of the mission of God to the world itself that universally belongs to him. Once again we observe the connection between ethics and mission. Israel's calling to be holy is not set *over against* the nations and the whole earth but *in the context of living among them for God*.

Israel's identity and responsibility. “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). We explored the meaning of Israel's role as *God's priesthood* in chapter ten (see pp. 330-33). There we saw that this concept of national priesthood has an essentially missional dimension, for it puts Israel in a dual role in relation to God and the nations, and gives them the priestly function of being the agent of blessing. God confers on Israel as a whole people the role of being his priesthood in the midst of the nations. As I said earlier

As the people of YHWH they would have the historical task of bringing the knowledge of God to the nations, and bringing the nations to the means of atonement with God. The Abrahamic task of being a means of blessing to the nations also put

them in the role of priests in the midst of the nations. Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so it would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations. (p. 331)

This priestly role, however, required *holiness* of Israel, just as it required holiness of their own priests in the midst of the ordinary people of Israel. If holiness is a condition of priesthood, and if priesthood is a dimension of mission, then clearly we need to understand more fully what the Bible means by holiness. It is unfortunately one of those words (like priesthood also) that have an accretion of connotations in the popular religious mind, not all of which by any means have much connection with its biblical meaning.

Being holy did not mean that the Israelites were to be a specially religious nation. A fundamental part of the meaning of the word is “different or distinctive.” Something or someone is holy when set apart for a distinct purpose and kept separate for that purpose. For Israel, it meant being different by reflecting the very different God that YHWH revealed himself to be, compared with other gods. Israel was to be as different from other nations as YHWH was different from other gods.¹⁶

There were in fact two aspects to Israel’s holiness, both of which are extended in their relevance for the church as God’s holy people.

Holiness, indicative and imperative. On the one hand *holiness was a given*—a fact of their existence. That is, God had set apart Israel for himself. It was his initiative and choice. “I am the LORD your God, who sanctifies you” (Lev 21:15)—that is, makes you holy, separate, distinct from the nations. Just like the experience of redemption, holiness is a prior gift of God’s grace. It was said repeatedly of Israel’s own priests that God had set them apart as holy (Lev 21:8, 15, 23). The same thing is also said of the people as a whole in relation to the nations. “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and *I have set you apart from the nations to be my own*” (Lev 20:26; cf. 22:31-33, emphasis added).

On the other hand, *holiness was a task*. That is, Israel was to live out in daily life the practical implications of their status as God’s holy people. “Be what you are” was the message. The following comprehensive instruction indicates the central meaning of this as distinctiveness from the nations:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their

¹⁶Cf. the extensive survey of this theme by Peter Machinist, “The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel,” in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991), pp. 420-42.

practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 18:3-4)

Holiness, symbolic and ethical. This practical task of holiness had two dimensions. It had a *symbolic* dimension, in which Israel gave expression to their distinctiveness from the nations through a complex system of clean and unclean regulations regarding animals, foods, and other daily eventualities. It is important to recognize this (national distinctiveness from the other nations) as the underlying rationale for the clean-unclean distinction. There are various ways in which the specific categories and what was included in them may be explained from an anthropological perspective. But the theological explanation given in the text for the system as a whole is that it represented the distinction between Israel and the nations.

I am the LORD your God, who has made a distinction between you and the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between clean and unclean birds. . . . You are to be holy to me, because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have distinguished you from the nations to be my own.¹⁷ (Lev 20:24-26, author's translation)

Practical holiness also had an *ethical* dimension, for being holy meant living lives of integrity, justice and compassion in every area—including personal, family, social, economic, and national life.

The most comprehensive single text that articulates the ethical dimension of holiness in Israel is Leviticus 19. It is the finest commentary we have on Exodus 19:6.

Holiness in all of life: Leviticus 19. “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). The superscription to the whole chapter expresses YHWH’s fundamental demand. It could be translated more colloquially, “You must be a distinctive people, because YHWH is a distinctive God.” In fact, as we saw in chapter 3 (pp. 80-81), YHWH is utterly unique and distinct as God. YHWH is not simply one of the gods of the nations, and not even like them. Holiness, among other things, includes this total otherness of YHWH as the Holy One of Israel—the utterly different God. For Israel to be holy then meant that they were to be a distinctive community among the nations, as Leviticus 18:3-4 had already ex-

¹⁷The language of distinction between is somewhat dissipated by the use of different phrases in the NIV; it is the same verb in all three instances, showing clearly the connection between the symbolic clean-unclean distinctions and the fundamental theological distinction between Israel and the other nations. This is the reason why, when the distinction between Jew and Gentile was abolished for those in Christ, the regulations regarding clean and unclean food, which had been symbolic of that distinction, were also abolished.

pressed in summary form. Or to be more precise, Israel was to be YHWH-like rather than like the nations. They were to do as YHWH does, not as the nations do. Holiness for Israel is a practical, down-to-earth reflection of the transcendent holiness of YHWH himself.

So what did this reflective holiness mean for Israel? What would it mean for them, in their earthly, historical and cultural circumstances, to be holy in a way that would reflect the holiness of YHWH? What content might we expect to be suspended under the stark headline of Leviticus 19:2: “Be holy”?

If we are inclined to think of holiness as a matter of private piety (in Christian terms) or as a matter of binding religious rituals (in Old Testament terms), then we might expect either a list of devotional exhortations for our deeper personal sanctity or a manual of obsolete ritual regulations for our relieved abandonment. Actually it contains none of the former and only a few of the latter. The bulk of the Leviticus 19 shows us that the kind of holiness that reflects God’s own holiness is thoroughly practical, social and very down-to-earth. Simply listing its contents highlights this dominant note.

Holiness in Leviticus 19 involves

- respect within the family and community (vv. 3, 32)
- exclusive loyalty to YHWH as God; proper treatment of sacrifices (vv. 4, 5-8)
- economic generosity in agriculture (vv. 9-10)
- observing the commandments regarding social relationships (vv. 11-12)
- economic justice in employment rights (v. 13)
- social compassion to the disabled (v. 14)
- judicial integrity in the legal system (vv. 12, 15)
- neighborly attitudes and behavior; loving one’s neighbor as oneself (vv. 16-18)
- preserving the symbolic tokens of religious distinctiveness (v. 19)
- sexual integrity (vv. 20-22, 29)
- rejection of practices connected with idolatrous or occult religion (vv. 26-31)
- no ill-treatment of ethnic minorities, but rather racial equality before the law and practical love for the alien as for oneself (vv. 33-34)
- commercial honesty in all trading transactions (vv. 35-36)

And all through the chapter runs the refrain “I am the LORD,” as if to say, “*Your* quality of life must reflect *my* character. This is what I require of *you* because this is what reflects *me*. This is what I myself would do.”

In all of these ways then—that is, in all the ways of down-to-earth practical

social ethics—Israel was to respond to their redemption by reflecting their Redeemer. In doing so they would not only prove their own distinctiveness from the nations but also make visible YHWH's difference from the gods of the nations. And that, as we remind ourselves so often, was their very reason for existence, their mission. If the people of Israel were to be God's priesthood in the midst of the nations, then they had to be different from the nations.

From God's covenant with Abraham we know that the chief agent of God's mission is the people of God.

From Exodus 19 and Leviticus 19, we know that the chief requirement on God's people if they are to fulfill that mission is that they should *be* what they *are*—the holy people of the holy God.

In short, Israel's *identity* (to be a priestly kingdom) declares a *mission*, and Israel's *mission* demands an *ethic* (to be a holy nation).

Missional Ethics and Covenant—Deuteronomy 4

The third great pillar of Israel's faith, their covenant relationship with God as a nation, was set in place in the next phase of their story. The story begins with the *election of Abraham* and the covenant God made with him and his descendants. It then moves to the great narrative of *redemption through the exodus* of the Israelites from Egypt. And it comes to rest, temporarily, at Mount Sinai, where God renews his *covenant* and establishes it with the whole nation. This is done with a view to the next stage of the story, which is the settlement of Israel in the land of Canaan.

We have seen how each of these stages forms part of the ongoing mission of God, which in its long-term perspective is to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. And we have now seen also, in this chapter, how Israel's ethical response to their election and redemption is woven into that missional identity and role. In the case of the covenant established at Sinai, the ethical response is even more clearly visible. One could hardly miss it. It is embodied in the great collections of laws and guidance for Israel's life in the land, which are embedded in the Sinai narratives of the Torah.

The ethical content of Old Testament law is, of course, a vast edifice that would require another book to elucidate.¹⁸ We must therefore focus our attention in one place, and Deuteronomy as the covenant document *par excellence* seems the most appropriate. The common perception of Deuteronomy, how-

¹⁸Such a book fortunately exists (along with many others in the same field, of course!): Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

ever, is that it is an exclusively nationalistic document, entirely focused on Israel's relationship with YHWH and uninterested in the wider purposes of God for the nations. In my view this is an unfortunate misconception. We have already observed a number of texts in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History that express the universality of YHWH and of the significance of Israel (see pp. 227-30).

At this point, however, it will be helpful to focus on one chapter—Deuteronomy 4—which makes some remarkable and programmatic affirmations. Furthermore, it is a chapter in which *the nations* make their appearance no less than five times, in very different modes. An overview of the flow of thought in the chapter will be helpful, followed by closer attention to four major thrusts within it.

Deuteronomy 4:1-40: An overview. Like several of the chapters in this part of the book, this section has a chiasmic or concentric structure. This means that we find matching points at the outer margins of the text, and then successive matching points at either end, arranged in mirror order around a central thrust. It is not quite so neat as some chapters of Deuteronomy, but the following outline gives an idea of the way these forty verses are carefully built around several key thoughts.

- A Live obediently to God's commands so that you may live in the land (vv. 1-2)
- B (Object lesson): following other gods leads to destruction; loyalty to YHWH keeps you safe (vv. 3-4)
- C Is there any people like Israel, the "great nation"? (vv. 5-8)
- D Fire and voice of God (vv. 9-14)
- E Warning and threat against idolatry (vv. 15-28; cf. v. 3)
- E' Promise of mercy for repentance and loyalty (vv. 29-31; cf. v. 4)
- D' Fire and voice of God (vv. 33, 36)
- C' Is there any god like YHWH? "Great nations" will be driven out (vv. 32-38)
- B' YHWH alone is God, so take the lesson to heart (v. 39)
- A' Live obediently to God's commands so that you may live long in the land (v. 40)

Working our way through the pattern, then, we see that it begins and ends with exhortations to live obediently to God's laws in the land that he is about to give them, so that they may live there long (vv. 1-2, 40). A prefatory reference to the great apostasy at Baal Peor (vv. 3-4; cf. Num 25) provides a graphic object lesson in the double message of the rest of the chapter: those who reject YHWH as Israel's sole covenant Lord and go after other gods will be destroyed, but those who hold fast to him will be spared. The first point is expanded in verses

15-28, the second in verses 29-31, and the message is repeated just before the end in verse 39.

Verses 5-8 set Israel's obedience to God's law in the land within the context of the nations. The nations will observe and comment on the "greatness" of Israel (a paradox, since they were actually a very small people, as Deut 7:7 more truthfully if less tactfully points out). Reflecting that point, though in a negative way, the nations and the land are again in focus in verse 38, but this time it is the nations who are "greater," but only as a foil to the fact that God would drive them out. Another chiasmic element here is that the rhetorical questions in this section (vv. 7-8), which express *the uniqueness of Israel among the nations*, are matched by the rhetorical questions in verses 32-34, which express *the uniqueness of YHWH among the gods*.

Verses 9-14 expand the reference to God's law and commandments by reminding Israel of the spectacular events that had accompanied them, and which they must never forget—especially the fire and the voice of God's words (cf. Ex 19). This reference to Sinai is again picked up in verses 33 and 36, with further reminder of the fire and the voice.

The *central section* of the chapter is thus verses 15-31, which falls into two main moods: the *warning* against idolatry with the threat of destruction (vv. 15-28), and the *promise* of restoration if there is repentance and a wholehearted loyalty and obedience to their covenant Lord, YHWH (vv. 29-31).

These two moods are sharply focused on the contrasting double description of YHWH. On the one hand, an idolatrous and disobedient people will confront the Lord God who is "a consuming fire, a jealous God" (v. 24). On the other hand, a repentant and obedient people will run into the arms of the same God, but the one who is also "a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath" (v. 31). Though verses 24 and 31 may seem contradictory when read side by side, the paradox is that both verses express the *consistency* of YHWH. The contradictions lie in his people. God is utterly consistent when he responds to rebels with wrath and to the repentant with mercy.

The whole chapter, then, is a microcosm of Deuteronomy as a whole. It is an urgent call to covenant loyalty through exclusive worship of YHWH alone, based on the unique history of his redeeming and revealing activity through the exodus and at Sinai, and worked out in practical ethical obedience to his laws in the land of promise, with a view to the affect this will have on the nations.

In the midst of this tightly argued articulation of what the covenant between Israel and YHWH was all about, *the nations* feature five times.

- The nations will observe the wisdom and understanding of Israel, providing Israel preserves the presence of God and the practice of justice (vv. 6-8).
- The nations have been assigned the heavenly bodies (for whatever purpose), but Israel is not to engage in any worship of such created things, but to worship only YHWH who delivered them from bondage for that purpose (vv. 19-20).¹⁹
- The nations will be the location for the scattering of Israel in judgment if Israel abandons YHWH for other gods (v. 27). There is some irony in the language here: In verse 38 God promises to drive the nations out before Israel. But Israel faces the threat, if they turn apostate, of having God drive them out among the nations.
- The nations have never experienced what Israel had recently experienced as the foundation of their unique covenant knowledge of YHWH—namely, his revelation at Sinai and his redemption from Egypt (vv. 32-34).
- The nations will be driven out before Israel in the giving of the land of Canaan, as promised to Abraham (v. 38).

How then, can we combine all this material in relation to our major investigation? In what ways is the covenant between YHWH and Israel, along with the ethical response that is intrinsic to it, related to the mission of God and his action among the nations? Four major points may be made on the basis of Deuteronomy 4.²⁰

The visibility of Israel's society (Deut 4:6-8). "Observe [these laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other great nation has their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other great nation has such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deut 4:6-8, author's translation).

Obedience to the law was not for Israel's benefit alone. It is a marked feature of the Old Testament that Israel lived on a very public stage. All that happened

¹⁹It is worth noting that Deut 4:19 does not say that God assigned the heavenly bodies to the nations for them to worship. That is a (possibly incorrect) inference from the immediately following words telling Israel not to worship them. The text (which is admittedly difficult) could mean no more than that God created the heavenly bodies for the benefit of the whole human race (according to the account in Gen 1), and if the other nations turn them into objects of worship, that is not something Israel is to imitate.

²⁰I have drawn extensively in the following comments on Deut 4 from my own commentary, Christopher J. H Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1996).

in Israel's history was open to the comment and reaction of the nations at large. Apart from being in any case inevitable, given the fluid international scene of the ancient Near East, this visibility of Israel was part of its theological identity and role as the priesthood of YHWH among the nations. It could be either positive, as here, when the nations are impressed with the wisdom of Israel's law (cf. Deut 28:10), or negative, as when the nations are shocked by the severity of Israel's judgment when they abandon the ways of their God (Deut 28:37; 29:22-28). Either way, faithful or unfaithful, the people of God are an open book to the world, and the world asks questions and draws conclusions.

The nations will notice and take an interest in the phenomenon of Israel as a society, with all the social, economic, legal, political, and religious dimensions of the Torah. And that social system will lead the nations to the conclusion that Israel as a people qualifies as a "great nation," to be applauded as "wise and understanding."²¹

But Moses goes on, with two rhetorical questions, to sharpen the point by emphasizing the foundation of Israel's national greatness as defined. First (v. 7), it is based on the *nearness of Yabweh* to his people. Second (v. 8), it is based on the *righteousness of the Torah*. Israel would have an intimacy with God and a quality of social justice that no other nation could match. These would be the factors that would lie behind the external reputation. As far as the nations could see, the thing that was different about Israel was simply a matter of wisdom and understanding. The inner reality was the presence of God and the justice of God's Torah.

The force of the rhetorical questions is to *invite comparison*, but in the confident expectation that nothing will invalidate the claims being made. The claim for Israel's social uniqueness was being made on a crowded stage, with plenty of other claimants for admirable systems of law. Israel itself knew of the ancient and acclaimed legal traditions of Mesopotamia; as a matter of fact, Israel's own legal traditions intersect with them at many points. Yet this claim for Old Testament law is advanced, quite possibly with deliberate polemical intent, since the law code of Hammurabi, for example, also claimed a divine quality of social righteousness.²²

²¹As my own translation of Deuteronomy 4:6-8 shows (p. 378), the claim of the text is not that there is no other nation greater than Israel, as is implied in the NIV translation ("what other nation is so great as to have . . ."). Rather, the text assumes that Israel is a great nation, but then defines that greatness in surprising terms—not military might or geographical or numerical size, but the nearness of the living God in prayer and the social justice of their constitution and laws.

²²On the claims of other ancient Near Eastern law codes, see, e.g., Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

Old Testament law explicitly invites, even welcomes, public inspection and comparison. But the expected result of such comparison is that Israel's law will be found superior in wisdom and justice. This is a monumental claim. It grants to the nations and to the readers of this text, including ourselves, the liberty to analyze Old Testament law in comparison with other social systems, ancient and modern, and to evaluate its claim. And indeed, the humaneness and justice of Israel's overall social and legal system have been favorably commented on by many scholars who have done the most meticulous studies of comparative ancient law, and its social relevance can still be profitably mined today.

From our missiological perspective, these verses articulate a motivation for obedience to the law that is easily overlooked but highly significant. The point is that if *Israel* would live as God intended, then *the nations* would notice. But Israel existed in any case for the ultimate purpose of being the vehicle of God's blessing the nations. That was in their "genetic code" from the very loins of Abraham. Here we find that at least one aspect of that blessing of the nations would be by providing such a model of social justice that the nations would observe and ask questions. The missional challenge, therefore, is that the ethical quality of life of the people of God (their obedience to the law, in this context) is a vital factor in the attraction of the nations to the living God—even if only at first out of curiosity.

The motivation for God's people to live by God's law is ultimately to bless the nations. After all, what would the nations actually *see*? The nearness of God is by definition invisible. What, then, would be *visible*? Only the practical evidence of the kind of society that was built on God's righteous laws.²³ There is a vital link between the invisible religious claims of the people of God (that God is near them when they pray) and their very visible practical social ethic. The world will be interested in the first only when it sees the second. Or, conversely, the world will see no reason to pay any attention to our claims about our invisible God, however much we boast of his alleged nearness to us in prayer, if it sees no difference between the lives of those who make such claims and those who don't.

The exclusivity of Israel's worship (Deut 4:9-31). Such a high responsibility—being God's visible model to the nations—needs to be taken seriously.

²³For further reflection on the strongly social ethical aspects of the covenant and their relevance to contemporary issues that are strongly taken up within liberation theology, see Christopher J. Baker, *Covenant and Liberation: Giving New Heart to God's Endangered Family* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), esp. chap. 13.

Two things could threaten it:

- if the laws of God were simply forgotten (hence the urgent necessity of teaching them [vv. 9-10])
- if God himself were forgotten in the enticement of going after other gods (hence the severe warnings of the central section of the chapter)

Covenant *obedience* (vv. 9-14) and covenant *loyalty* (vv. 15-24), therefore, are here set in the context of covenant *witness* (vv. 6-8). To have any hope of being a witness to the nations of the nearness of God and of the justice of his laws, Israel had to worship YHWH alone and obey his laws. Disobedience to the law would negate the intention of being a just society. Running after other gods would drive YHWH far away, not draw him near in prayer.

So the thrust of this section (vv. 9-31) is well captured in the phrase that is reiterated three times: “Only be careful, and watch yourselves” (vv. 9, 15, 23—the phrase is the same in Hebrew each time, even though translated differently in the NIV). The most fundamental demand of the covenant was exclusive loyalty to YHWH. Correspondingly, the most fundamental way to break the covenant was by worshiping any other god or gods. If this happened, then Israel would lose their primary distinctiveness and indeed be scattered among the very nations from whom they were supposed to be separate and to whom they were supposed to be a model (vv. 25-28).

The negative warnings of this central section of the chapter (vv. 9-31), then, should be seen in the light of and for the sake of the positive missional potential of verses 6-8. That is what is at stake. The exclusivity of Israel's worship of YHWH is integral to the visibility of Israel's society to the nations. The hope of verses 6-8 would never be realized if the people neglect the primary demand of the covenant—to worship and serve the LORD only. Or to put it the other way round, *idolatry is the first and greatest threat to Israel's mission* (and ours).

This point is served even by the strongly repeated emphasis on the fact that YHWH had been heard but not seen at Sinai (vv. 12, 15, 36). Some find here a contrast between the invisible God of Israel and the visible, material, statues of the gods of the nations. But that is not what this text stresses. The contrast in these verses is not between the visible and the invisible but *between the visible and the audible*. Idols do have “form,” but do not speak. YHWH has no “form,” but he decisively speaks. Idols are visible but dumb. YHWH is invisible but eloquent. YHWH addresses his people unambiguously in words of promise and demand, gift and claim. This introduces a fundamentally moral distinction into the contrast between the aniconic faith of Israel

and surrounding visual, iconic polytheism. The issue is not merely one of different gods having different looking idols by which you can tell them apart. What sets YHWH apart is not that *he* looks different from other *gods* but that he calls for a *people* who will look different from other *nations*. *They* are to manifest a visibly different way of life, a different social order and a different dynamic of worship. And in doing so, they will bear witness to the living God, whose form they did not and cannot see, but whose word they have unmistakably heard.

Two further things may be said on verses 16-20.

On the one hand, the list of possible “shapes” that idols might take (the phrase is identical to the words of the second commandment [cf. Deut 5:8]) is given in an order that precisely reverses the order of the creation narrative: human beings, land animals, birds, fish, the heavenly bodies. The point, which this literary tactic is probably deliberately designed to suggest, is that idolatry perverts and turns upside down the whole created order. When the living Creator God is removed from his rightful place of sole and exclusive worship, everything else in creation becomes chaotic.

On the other hand, the text does recognize the double enticement that certain objects in creation would have for Israel: Their awesome majesty seemed to call for worship, and that is exactly what the other nations succumb to. So for Israel to worship them would be once again to fail to preserve their distinctiveness from the rest of the nations and also to subvert the purpose for which God had redeemed them. The emphasis at the beginning and end of verse 20 is on that distinctiveness, a distinctiveness that idolatry would radically compromise.

The mission of God through Israel is nothing less than the redemption of the nations and the restoration of creation. That mission could not be served if Israel indulged in practices that were nothing more than imitation of the nations and the inversion of creation

The uniqueness of Israel's experience (Deut 4:32-35). “Ask now concerning the former days that were before your time, from the day God created humankind on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has there ever happened anything like this great thing, or has anything like it ever been heard? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you heard it, and lived? Or did God set out to take for himself any nation from out of the midst of another nation by testings, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, by marvelous great deeds, like all that YHWH your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? You were made to see these things in order to know that YHWH, he is the God; there is no

other beside him (Deut 4:32-35, author's translation).²⁴

These verses are the climax not just of Deuteronomy 4 but of the whole first discourse of Moses in the book. They are fittingly exalted in content and style. This whole section mirrors verses 5-8 but elevates the theme tremendously. The stylistic device of rhetorical questions that expressed the incomparability of *Israel* in verses 6-8 is employed again here to affirm the incomparability of YHWH, and for a similarly combined ethical and missiological purpose.

The supreme point of this whole speech, then, is a monotheistic acclamation (vv. 35, 39) wreathed in cosmic language, demonstrated in historical experience and demanding ethical response.

A research project of truly cosmic scale is imagined in verse 32, encompassing the whole of human history hitherto and the whole of universal space. Such is Moses' confidence that the questions he is about to pose will find no answer. Moses refers to both the Sinai theophany and the exodus deliverance, but in his opening question they are seen together as a single "great thing." And his claim is that nothing like them has ever happened.²⁵ What God did in the events of the exodus and Sinai was unprecedented (God had never done such a thing at

²⁴In vv. 33-34 in the NIV ("The voice of God. . . . Has any god ever tried . . .") mixes up two possible exegetical ways of reading these verses, when it would probably be better to opt for either one or the other in both verses. In Hebrew, *'ēlōhîm*, without a definite article, can mean God (i.e., assumed to be YHWH) or a god or gods. Contexts usually leave no doubt as to which is intended in each case. If we take the second of the NIV's options (v. 34) first, then Moses' questions are primarily contrasting YHWH with other gods: "Has any people heard the voice of a god [i.e., their own god] speaking out of fire [i.e., in the same way that YHWH spoke to you]? Has any other god ever tried to take a people . . . ?" Taken thus, the emphasis is clearly on the uniqueness of YHWH himself. No other alleged god has done either of these things. But this would leave open the possible question whether or not YHWH himself had done such things for other peoples. No other god had, but YHWH could have.

My view, however, (reflected in my translation) assumes the stronger meaning of *'ēlōhîm* in both questions. Not only, with the NIV, "Has any other people heard the voice of God [Yahweh]?" (expected answer, no, because God has spoken to no other people in such a way); but also "Has God [i.e., YHWH] ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another? (expected answer, no, because no exodus has been like Israel's as described here). Taken thus, the emphasis is more clearly on the uniqueness of Israel's experience of the work of God, but the first affirmation is still preserved. Only YHWH had made himself known in these ways and only Israel had experienced them. This seems to fit better with the thrust of vv. 35-40. It was precisely because Israel had experienced what no other nation had that they were entrusted with the true knowledge of the one living God and were called to live in the light of such dynamic monotheism.

²⁵Once again, the NIV slightly distorts the simplicity of the Hebrew with its phraseology "anything so great as this?" The sentence literally reads, "Has there happened [anything] like this great deed/thing/event [*dābar*] or has there been heard [anything] like it?" The point is not quite that nothing greater had happened but that nothing like it had happened. The emphasis is on the uniqueness of events that were manifestly "a great thing."

any other time) and unparalleled (God had never done such a thing anywhere else for any other nations).

There was a uniqueness about Israel's experience that is being powerfully affirmed here. YHWH spoke to them in a way no other people had experienced (cf. Ps 147:19-20), and YHWH redeemed them in a way that no other people had known (cf. Amos 3:1-2). The people of Israel, then, have had a unique experience of both *revelation* and *redemption*, through which they have come to know the unique God, YHWH.

So what?

Verse 35 (repeated and amplified at verse 39) emphatically declares the purpose of this whole "great thing." All that Israel had so uniquely experienced was so that they would learn something utterly vital—the *identity* of the living God. YHWH, and YHWH alone, is God and there is no other anywhere else in the universe.²⁶ It is important to take verses 32-34 as seriously as this, and not to dismiss them as mere hyperbole simply because of their rhetorical form, especially in view of what hangs on them in verse 35, namely, the unequivocal affirmation of the uniqueness of YHWH as God. This is the theological freight that the rhetorical rolling stock is carrying. The people of Israel can be confident in their knowledge of God because of the unique experience of God's revealing and redeeming power that was entrusted to them. *You* (the pronoun is emphatic) were shown these things so that *you* might know. In a world of nations that do not know YHWH as God, Israel is now the one nation that has been entrusted with that essential knowledge. They know God as no other nation did because they have experienced God as no other nation had. The question now becomes, What will they do with that knowledge, and how will they respond to the privilege and responsibility of having it?

Before answering that, we might pause for an aside in relation to a major contemporary missiological issue. The emphasis on the uniqueness of Israel and of YHWH speaks to the contemporary question of *the uniqueness of Christ in the context of religious pluralism*.

Far too often, in this latter debate, the uniqueness of Christ is argued over without reference to Jesus' own self-conscious deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is presented as if he were the founder of a new religion, which assuredly was not his purpose. Jesus came, by his own claims and in the united New Testament witness to him, not to found a new religion but to complete the saving work of YHWH, God of Israel, for the sake of Israel and the world—a work that God had been moving purposively forward for centuries.

²⁶See p. 77 for broader discussion of the meaning of Old Testament monotheism.

Theologically as well as historically, a line runs from exodus and Sinai in our text to the incarnation and Easter events. What YHWH (and no other god) had redemptively initiated in the history of Israel (and no other people), he brought to completion for the whole world in Jesus of Nazareth (and no other person). The uniqueness of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, and thereby as Savior of the world, is grounded in the uniqueness of Israel itself and of YHWH as God, for according to the New Testament Jesus embodied the one and incarnated the other. And the central struggle of early Christianity, to which the New Testament bears witness, was to recognize and express this final truth within the parameters of an undiluted commitment to the dynamic monotheism of Israel's own faith as affirmed here.

The missiological urgency of the interfaith debate must be grounded in a fully biblical understanding of the uniqueness of God's saving work in history, which means starting with the affirmation of this and similar Old Testament texts about the one and only living God, and not with a Jesus severed from his scriptural and historical roots. For this same reason, Christians are not at liberty to abandon the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament or to regard the Scriptures of other religions or cultures as equivalent and adequate preparations for Christ. For the thrust of this text is clear: it is *these* events (and no others) that witness to *this* God (and no other). And the thrust of our New Testament is equally clear: It is *this* God (and no other) who became flesh to reconcile the world to himself in *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth (and no other).

The missional responsibility of Israel's obedience. Returning to our text, I must conclude by noting that the final thrust of its rhetoric in verse 40 is once more thoroughly ethical. For unless Israel would go on living in the future in accordance with God's law, what value would there be from their incredible historical and religious experience in the past? The past alone would not guarantee their own continued survival in the land, unaccompanied by responsive obedience. And furthermore, how would the nations come to know of the uniqueness of YHWH as the living God and of his saving action in history unless they are drawn by the ethical distinctiveness of God's people (cf. vv. 6-8)? If God's people abandon their ethical distinctiveness by forgetfulness, idolatry or disobedience, then not only do they jeopardize their own well-being (v. 40), they also frustrate the broader purposes of the God who brought them into existence by his electing love and brought them out of bondage by his redeeming power.

Deuteronomy 4 thus returns at the end (v. 40) to the place where it began (vv. 1-2)—urging Israel to obedience. But now we are able to see two things in much greater depth:

1. the motivation for Israel's obedience (the great things YHWH had done in the past)
2. the goal of Israel's obedience (Israel's well-being in the land in the future as a nation of godliness and social justice, and thereby as a witness to the nations)

The covenantal and missional logic that surges through the chapter runs in a grand loop that we can now summarize as follows:

- Israel is summoned to live in wholehearted obedience to God's covenant law when they take possession of the land (vv. 1-2).
- Failure to do so will lead to the same fate as befell those who were seduced into idolatry and immorality by the Moabites at Beth Peor (vv. 3-4).
- Covenant loyalty and obedience will constitute a witness to the nations whose interest and questions will revolve around the God they worship and the just laws they live by (vv. 5-8).
- This witness, however, would be utterly nullified by Israel going after other gods, and so they must be strenuously warned against that through reminders of their spectacular past and warnings of a horrific future if they ignore the word (vv. 9-31).
- Above all, let them remember that alone among all the nations they have had unique experience of the revelation and redemption of God, on the basis of which they have come to know YHWH as God in all his own transcendent uniqueness (vv. 32-38).
- Let them then demonstrate their acknowledgement of all these things in faithful obedience (vv. 39-40).
- Therein lies their future security as a people, and thereby also hangs their mission as the people chosen by God for the sake of his mission (v. 40).

A very strong echo of the thought of this passage is found in the record of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8. The missional hope expressed in the prayer that God would respond even to the prayers of the foreigner, in order that "all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you" (1 Kings 8:43), is turned into a missional challenge to the people that they must be as committed to God's law as God is committed to such a worldwide goal. The Deuteronomic historian clearly endorses the ethical and missional logic of his foundational text.

May [the LORD] uphold the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel according to each day's need, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that

the LORD is God and that there is no other. But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time.
(1 Kings 8:60-61)

Missional Ethics and the Church

"You," said Peter, writing to scattered groups of Christian believers, almost certainly mixed communities of Jew and Gentiles, "are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9). At one stroke Peter connects his Christian readers with the whole heritage of Old Testament Israel. Indeed, he identifies them as the same people, continuous with those who heard the words he quotes at the foot of Mount Sinai (Ex 19:4-6), heirs of the same purpose of God through the Messiah Jesus. In doing so, Peter is consistent with the rest of the New Testament witness and claim: Those who are in Christ are in Abraham, called for the same purpose, redeemed by the same God, committed to the same response of ethical obedience.

A full-scale presentation of New Testament ethics is out of the question here, of course. My purpose is much more limited. It is to show, on the one hand, that as in the Old Testament, the ethical demand on those who are God's people is a matter of appropriate response to their election, redemption and covenant. That is, Christians also are those who, according to the New Testament, have been called by God, redeemed by God and have been brought into a reciprocal relationship with God. In all these respects, of course, Christian ethics must be seen (again as in the Old Testament) as a response to God's grace, received and anticipated. And on the other hand, my purpose is to draw attention to the way at least some significant texts in the New Testament connect this ethical responsibility to God's wider mission. In other words, there seems to me to be as much value in a missiological hermeneutic in relation to the ethics of the New Testament as of the Old.

Election and ethics. The familiar pattern of several of Paul's letters is to put his teaching about God's calling of his people in the opening sections, followed by the ethical response that should therefore be forthcoming. Even in (probably) his earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, this theological order is apparent without being clearly structured. "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you," he says in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, and sees evidence of this in the quality of their life as it has been reported to him. He goes on, in 1 Thessalonians 4, to urge them to continue "to live in order to please God" (v. 1), as a matter of "God's will" (v. 3) and of their calling to holiness (v. 7).

Such transformed living as a response to our election, however, is not merely pleasing to God, it is also a matter of observation by outsiders. Like Israel among

the nations, the Thessalonian believers must remember their own visibility to the wider community.

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Thess 4:11-12)

In Colossians and Ephesians the structure and logic are clearer. God's election and calling of his people is placed right up front and expanded in detail, though its ethical purpose is made clear very quickly also.

He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. (Eph 1:4)

We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work. (Col 1:9-10)

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)

Both epistles, however, place all this within the wider context of God's overall purpose for the whole creation, which is to bring it together in reconciled harmony with God through the cross of Christ (Eph 1:10; Col 1:19-20). The ethical behavior of believers is thus seen as an integral part of that universal mission of God for the healing of creation. It is also seen as that which gives authenticity to the evangelistic preaching of the apostles—another way in which ethics is linked to mission (Eph 6:19-20; Col 4:2-6).

Redemption and ethics. *Paul: Adorn the gospel.* Paul's little letter to Titus is remarkable in that within its forty-six verses it speaks of "what is good" eight times—either loving what is good, teaching what is good, or (most often) doing what is good. The ethical flavor (in contrast to the alleged moral corruption of Crete) is very strong. But it is set in the equally strong context of the language of redemption and salvation. For the phrase "God our Savior" or "Jesus our Savior" occurs with almost equal frequency.

The climax of this combination of God's redemption with human ethical response comes in Paul's instructions to slaves. And notably the missional motivation is that by their behavior Christian slaves can commend the message of God's salvation (Tit 2:9-14). Doubtless what Paul says here to slaves applies in principle to all members of the church. We either adorn the gospel or we are a disgrace to it. Our ethics (or lack of ethics) support (or undermine) our mission.

Peter: Visibly good lives. The closest New Testament text to the one we studied in detail above in relation to ethics in response to redemption, namely, Ex-

odus 19:3-6, is of course 1 Peter 2:9-12. Peter applies to Christian believers terms drawn from this text in Exodus as well as others from Isaiah 43:20-21 and Hosea 2:23. In fact, he combines all three of our key words (*election*, *redemption* and *covenant*) by speaking of Christians as “chosen” (cf. 1 Pet 1:1-2), as “called . . . out of darkness” (an exodus allusion, but cf. also 1 Pet 1:18-19), and as “a people of God.” But having alluded to the priestly identity and holy calling of his readers, Peter goes on to draw out exactly the same ethical and missional implications that we observed in relation to those terms in their Old Testament context. “Live such good lives among the nations that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12, author’s translation).²⁷

The flow of logic from verses 9-10 through verses 11-12 (which is sadly sometimes broken up by paragraph divisions), thus runs as follows:

- If this is what you are (your *identity*, through election, redemption and covenant)
- then this is how you must live (your *ethics*)
- and this is what will result among the nations (your *mission*)

The message is plain. Christians are to be as visible to the nations by the quality of their moral lives as Israel had been intended to be (but failed). And the purpose of that ethical visibility is ultimately to bring the nations to glorify God.²⁸ The same dynamic of ethics and mission is as clear here as in Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

In the same passage Peter connects this nonverbal moral witness before the nations to the more explicitly verbal proclamation of the “praises” or “excellencies” (*aretas*) of God to which Christians are called (v. 9). There is probably an

²⁷Unfortunately in the place of “nations,” many English translations say “pagans” or “heathen,” where Peter uses “the nations” (*en tois ethnesin*)—the same Greek word that regularly translates the Hebrew *hāggōyīm*—“the Gentile nations.” This constitutes a remarkable transformation in the binary opposites: Israel and Gentiles. The difference is no longer being defined as ethnic Jew and ethnic non-Jews. Rather it is being defined in relation to faith in Christ. Just as by claiming that believers in Jesus (Jew and Gentile) are now the inheritors of the identity of Israel, so Peter has transformed the meaning of *Gentile* from “non-Jews” to “non-Christians.”

²⁸When will the nations “glorify God”? Taken strictly, it might appear that it will only be at the moment of final judgment “on the day of visitation”—and thus without hope of salvation. However, the phrase “glorifying God” normally refers to the worship of those who are God’s people (cf. 1 Pet 4:16), “and the use of the term here evidently signals repentance and religious conversion at or before the last day (cf. Rev. 11:13; 14:7; 16:9).” Mark Boyley, “1 Peter—A Mission Document?” *Reformed Theological Review* 63 (2004): 84.

echo in this phrase of Isaiah 42:12, where the nations that have been affected by the mission of the Servant of YHWH are invited to do exactly this.

Let them give glory to the LORD

and proclaim his praise [LXX *aretas*] in the islands.

Thus the nations are now being summoned to join in what was the primary purpose of Israel (Is 43:21). Peter sees the scattered communities of believers, like the exiles of Israel of old, combining the worship and witness of Israel and the nations in their proclamation of God's praiseworthy excellencies.

So the mission of the church, according to Peter, includes both verbal proclamation and ethical living, and the impact of his tight argument is that *both* are utterly essential. Indeed, in one specific case he argues that positively good living can be evangelistically effective even when verbal witness is hindered or inadvisable. Wives of nonbelieving husbands could witness without words through the quality of their lives, so that "if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Pet 3:2). Peter is *not*, of course, *prohibiting* wives from using words when the opportunity arose, any more than he is saying that husbands could be saved without eventually coming to believe the Word. But he is reinforcing the message of 1 Peter 2:11-12—that there is great missional and evangelistic power in lives shaped by the standards of biblical holiness and goodness.

Holy living or good behavior which promotes Christian belief is a particularly strong thrust in this epistle. Rather than defensively withdrawing, Christians are to participate in the created institutions of their society, and precisely there to offer a fearless testimony of good deeds. They do this in imitation of their Lord's response to suffering and with a view to their oppressors being silenced, or perhaps even "won over" to belief in Christ.²⁹

Covenant and ethics. *First Peter.* It would seem almost certain that Peter's phraseology in 1 Peter 2:12 is a conscious echo of the teaching he once heard from the lips of Jesus. "You," Jesus had said to his rough band of doubtless astonished disciples, "*are the light of the world*. . . . Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:14, 16).

The imagery chosen by Jesus undoubtedly echoes the task given by YHWH to Israel that they were to be "a light to the nations." And in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' purpose is to portray the quality of life, character

²⁹Boyley, "1 Peter," p. 86.

and behavior of those who constitute the new covenant people of God being formed around himself as the messianic Servant King. Just as Israel should have let its light shine as an attraction to the nations (whether the ethical light of Is 58:6-10 or the light of God's presence in their midst [Is 60:1-3]), so the disciples of Jesus must let the light of good works shine in such a way that people will come to glorify the living God. The missional purpose of Jesus' ethical teaching is clear and Peter obviously took it to heart.

Matthew. The famous ending of Matthew's Gospel, the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20) is equally covenantal in flavor, since it echoes Deuteronomy so strongly (see pp. 354-55). Jesus assumes the position of the Lord God himself, whose authority in heaven and on earth has now been given to him. On that foundation, he commissions his own disciples to go out and replicate themselves by creating communities of obedience among the nations. They are to teach, and the nations are to learn, what it means to "observe all that I have commanded you," a piece of pure Deuteronomy. Thus mission is replicated discipleship, learned through ethical obedience and passed on through teaching.³⁰

John. Finally, we should note how John's Gospel sets the obedience of the disciples to the commands of Jesus in the context of the author's explicit missional desire that his readers, whoever they may be, may come to saving faith in Christ (Jn 20:30-31). Again, echoing the covenantal language of Deuteronomy, love is constituted by obedience to the commands of Christ, just as God's Old Testament people were both to love YHWH and to prove it in obeying his commands. The missional implications and motivation of this connection is succinctly captured by Jesus in his further word: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). The same missional dynamic is operating in Jesus' great prayer for his disciples and their witness in the world in John 17.

The language of covenant is the language of a people in reciprocal relationship with God, initiated by God's grace and responded to in human obedience. We have seen in the Old Testament that this is connected to Israel's identity and mission within the universal mission of God for all nations. Here in the New Testament, the missional nature of the new covenant people of God is seen in these three texts from Peter, Matthew and John. God's new people in Christ are also a people for the sake of the world, and this is to be reflected in their lives.

³⁰For further discussion of the covenant motif in Matthew, see, Robert L. Brawley, "Reverberations of Abrahamic Covenant Traditions in the Ethics of Matthew," in *Realia Dei*, ed. Prescott H. Williams and Theodore Hiebert (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 26-46.

In short, as God's covenant people, Christians are meant to be

- a people who are light to the world by their good lives (1 Pet)
- a people who are learning obedience and teaching it to the nations (Mt)
- a people who love one another in order to show who they belong to (Jn)

It would be hard to find a more concise articulation of the integration of Christian ethics and Christian mission.